

THE MAGIC CIRCLE: A NOVEL

by

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

The Mennonite Brethren church, a swell of dust-brown brick above a pale gravel lot, sits dead in the center of Midland. The grade school playground abuts the property to the north; to the south, there's an empty lot and then the grain elevator lurches five stories up, blazing silver-white in the late summer sun. On the other side, the Atchison-Topeka-Santa Fe trains rumble past at 10 and 2 and 7 and sometimes 11. The pastor builds a break in his late Sunday sermon to accommodate the train whistle, and rises every morning to the 6 a.m. howl of the work siren blaring from the Farmers' Co op office next to the elevator.

The town and surrounding county is attuned to these sounds and rumbles and calls, as well. A newspaper that hasn't landed on the porch before the morning call usually means a ringing phone at the *Midland News* office. Kids spill from the high school at lunch while the siren bell is still rotating atop its tower. The noon whistle carries for miles and means a break for farmers, too, back to their houses for dinner; the evening whistle marks a good day, if they're able to follow it home for supper.

These are people used to order.

Today, the town meets in the Mennonite Brethren Church basement. The townspeople wear Sunday clothes, the women in skirts, hair in tall fashionable bee-hives or wrestled into the perky permanent-wave curls the lone Midland beautician favors. Their men wear sedate brown suits, brown shoes, and brown socks that make their feet itch, everything plain like the bricks on the church's exterior, which these men planned, laid, financed, and tend. The farmers come fresh from the fields, in overalls and dusty boots, their wives trailing in church dresses and headscarves, all with firm hard scowls that speak of arguments in the truck on the way over: Take a shower, at least, we'll look like country folk; Well, all's the better. They should know who we are. Besides, there's work to get back to.

A window air conditioning unit buzzes like a windup airplane engine in the corner and drips a steady stream of water into a rusting coffee can. Children's artwork papers the walls with crayon Jesuses and Moseses and Noahs. This is the Sunday-school room and the fellowship hall combined. Today, it will hold a little more than its usual number, because it's usually set only for the church population. Today it will hold the town. The sanctuary above has more seating, but no one wanted to invite the military speakers into there.

An old percolator cooks up dark coffee in the kitchen, and half the seated people have already had a polite cup at the kitchen window. The calm, sweet-faced pastor greets the military men at the bottom of the stairs with a smile.

"Gentlemen, what a pleasure to meet you," he says. "Can we get you a cup of coffee?"

The military men, a captain and a second lieutenant, wear suits of shiny blue-gray wool and shift uncomfortably in the damp cool. They take the coffee - good, strong black coffee in sturdy orange glass mugs. On base, it's said the Mennonites know their pie, coffee, and furniture building. On base, they often confuse them for Amish settlers, forgetting that Mennonites drive, drink, vote, laugh.

The men take a position near the American and Kansas flags standing in the corner of the room. The corner is a good spot for recon; it feels like a place they have some cover. They are here to talk about the missile, to remind these people that it is inevitable, that the Air Force will get what it wants — what it needs — whether the town approves or not.

That's the boilerplate, and what the second lieutenant is here to observe. He'll be holding one of his own off in Lincoln County next week, and won't that be an easier meeting. No pacifists out that way, just good country Catholics. He talked about his good luck on that draw most of the drive out here.

The captain, a veteran of these presentations, doesn't expect a fight. These are pacifists, after all. These are people used to order. They rise with the sun and race it for the rest of the day, trying to squeeze an extra minute from every hour, an extra spark of sunlight from behind every sliding cloud. Because the church is the one place that can compel their rest, it is the place that holds the most sway. So the military men are glad to be here, glad to have this invitation, this tacit endorsement, of their efforts. It's not these men the captain is afraid of, it's the report he has to make when he's back on base, it's the lies he'll have to tell about the town being on board, about the patriotism he experienced in the tiny church basement. They gave us coffee, he'll say, they were very kind.

The crowd gets settled, and then men edge forward at the front of the room, stop behind a podium last used when the pastor and his wife came back from their mission trip to Mexico. A Mennonite Hymnal is tucked onto the shelf. The captain, a tall, blonde man who has thought to remove his sharp uniform cap, introduces himself as a community liaison officer, leaning on the word community. He has no slides, no stories of starvation or hope. Instead, he talks in military terms: safety of the country, defensive deployments, rapid response. Though he is from McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, he speaks with a Southern accent that makes most of the people wary, uncomfortable. His

speech is slow and thorough, and the women nudge their husbands awake and worry about roasts in ovens, chickens defrosting in sinks.

“The installation is on schedule for December, 1964,” the captain says, and suddenly everyone is alert. He sees the ripple in the crowd and takes a sip of his coffee. “I’m here to listen to your concerns,” he says, because this is the deal. This is the deal that a call from the pastor elicited from the project commander. Listening can smooth things over, after all, and though it may imply it, listening doesn’t guarantee consideration. These are the captain’s standing orders: listen and promise nothing. Listen and carry on like you haven’t heard a word.

Harold Gerhardt stands from the second row. He is an imposing figure: 55, a farmer whose father died at his side during the Depression, built sturdy-tough with sinewy shoulders like a bull and a temperament like the creature, too. Solid, trust-worthy, salt-of-the-earth, not one to trifle with. Not one who even understands trifles. Hair and skin the perfect color of dirt baked in dry summer heat, so that everything about the man is constructed as if from the ground he works and loves. His hat, an old-fashioned gray felt Stetson, is yellowed by grit and sun and sweat. To see him hold it in his broad, sun-darkened hands makes every man in the place sit up straighter, grip his own hat or belt a bit tighter.

Harold nods at the pastor. "Sir, I am sorry if I missed something," he says. "I was still drinking my coffee when you started. So maybe I missed a bit. I sure feel as though I missed something. 'Cuz I think I heard this man say everything's already scheduled."

"That is correct," the captain says, "Mister —"

"Now I thought we were having a meeting here to talk this through," Harold says. "I thought we were having a talk. I don't have the time for a lecture on what you are and aren't scheduling. I have the time to talk things through, though. I would appreciate that talk."

"Of course, we're happy to talk about your concerns," the captain says. The coffee cup in his hand provides, suddenly, a necessary warmth against the cold nervous tingle building in his chest. He is 24, half the age of this burly man before him, and he has a good idea that nothing in his training manual is going to assuage this town's fear.

"What questions can I answer for you?"

"Well, sir," Harold says, and he means the honorific. He has no trouble with it, because it's the way he's always talked to outsiders. "I got some concerns. I'm pretty concerned when I hear you say this is going to happen and I haven't yet heard where. I haven't yet heard you say a word about land, and you can understand as how that might concern me a bit."

“Certainly,” the officer says. He explains the plans coolly, just as he knows them: they need about 25 acres for the base and travel rights over 75 more. Access to the railroad is crucial, and the nearer Highway 40, the better, as they’re already starting plans to reinforce it. The construction will take a year; the missiles are supposed to be shipped to McConnell late in 1964, and placed shortly after, with all bases scheduled active by January, 1965.

Harold stands with his head tilted, not nodding, not saying a word. Finally, he says, “Well, it seems like you got it all reasoned out, that’s just fine. But there isn’t a man in this room that’s gonna let it go like that. That land that’s so convenient to your missile, sir, that’s land we live on. A hundred acres is half a farm, out here. That’s land we worked for. My family’s had the same space for the past 70 some years. You understand me? You understand that? And I got to say, I don’t see why this particular stretch is so vital to your plans.” He spreads his hands out, the hat skimming barely over the upright head of his closest neighbor. “Nothing here for anyone to send a missile after, anyway, ‘less you put something out here for them to hit.”

The crowd murmurs its agreement with chuckles and “that’s right’s” and a little smattering of applause, and Harold takes his seat. His wife, Hannah, nods her head, acknowledging the rightness here, the rightness of the

crowd's response to her husband. Harold settles the hat back in his lap. He's said his piece and that's what he came to do.

The captain has yet to finish his mission. He clears his throat. "Actually, we have made an offer for a specific piece of land," he says. "So I can assure you, no one here will see their land touched."

Heads turn to the back row, which is empty. No late comers. Neighbors are consulted by whisper, by lift of eyebrow, by a waving raise of hand. And sure enough, no one can spot August and Melissa Wedel or either of their girls. "They're always late," someone whispers, but everyone knows, already; they're not coming. They think collectively of the green promise of the Wedel land, then the bad luck that's fallen there, the hail, the flood, and the expensive implements gathering rust and heavy interest payments. There were rumors that August was thinking of getting out of the whole business, what with his wife's health always a little shaky, that he was going to sell the place out to a cousin in Nebraska or something, but nothing concrete. August was always a quiet son-of-a-gun, but now his absence seems enormous.

They turn back to the captain, who says, "We're not taking any land that wasn't offered to us." What he doesn't say is that if they hadn't found the Wedel place, they would have taken someplace else. This is what they are

authorized to do. Here, at least, they haven't had to, but he can see it's cold and uncertain comfort now. He sees their surprise, feels his advantage, and presses forward. "I assure you," he says again, language straight from their manuals, "this is actually going to be a boon for you. For the county. We'll leave everything we touch a little better than it was before," he says. "For instance, your county highway, that's going to get a good resurfacing. I saw you had some potholes there, and we're gonna take care of that for you." He can be magnanimous, now; they're still shifting around in their seats, glancing at each other like the green cadets they are. This is more like it. This is the kind of respect, the kind of deference, he expected. It's time to remind them that he's young but he's a professional. He is a man who handles weapons and national security every day, while they're waking early to feed pigs or cows or whatever it is they do out here.

"Let me tell you," he says, "it's foolish to think that our enemies won't target every last one of us, if the day comes." It seems like the right language, standing there looking at finger paintings of the cross, his fingers tapping on the hymnal. "If they decide they want to take out the United States, they're going to come with everything they have, and so far, so far we're lucky, they don't have the weaponry to reach out here immediately. You're in what

we call the magic circle, this big space they can't quite from their mainland." He traces the shape on the map, a vague oval with Kansas at its center, not quite reaching into Texas or the Dakotas, edging up to the Colorado Rockies and into the boot heel of Missouri. "And that gives us an advantage. We can strike from here and still be assured we'll get them. We can strike from places they can't touch. That's what we're thinking about, that's why we need these weapons out here. We've got a chance, here, to strike them hard, no matter what they've done, no matter where they've targeted, right from the heart of our country, from these places they can't quite reach yet. And we want them to know we've got that power; we don't want them sleeping soundly at night at all." He puts his firmest smile in place, one like the commander uses down at base when he's really telling them they're screwed. The listeners have settled into silence, not quite sullen but not completely eager. That's fine, they should be ready to go home, ready to forget all about this. No reason to keep thinking on it, in the captain's view; what's going to happen is going to happen. That's how the Air Force works. "We do want you all sleeping just as clear and easy as always. All right? So as this goes on, we're going to keep talking to you, we're going to keep you well informed. And you'll see our guys around, no doubt about that. I hear there's a good steak sandwich down the road, is that the truth?"

The pastor nods mildly. "We always recommend the café to strangers, don't we?" he says, standing from his front-row seat. He barely comes up to the captain's shoulder, and he keeps his hands tucked neatly in front of him, and yet the captain knows he's been dismissed. He understands the protocol of command. "Gentlemen, we do thank you for your time."

And that is it, the entire meeting. The military men walk back into the sunshine and spare almost no thought for the fact that everyone else is still inside the church.

Inside the church, the pastor is at the podium, his head already bowed, the silence around them his request, to give time for reflection, for personal communication with the Lord. Harold Gerhardt is shifting in his chair and almost every eye in the place has darted to his broad back at least once since the silence fell. The word they remember is *foolish*. What they will tell their children is exactly what they must: these men that came, they were young and brash and very, very wrong, part of a world full of killing, and it is their duty to oppose this at every conceivable turn.

So help them, God.

CHAPTER II
THE GERHARDTS

Country roads are hard on cars. Trucks take the sand like nothing; they sit high and throw the rocks high and avoid, for the most part, the heart-breaking ping of windshield glass nicking or the gut-clenching feel of the back tires spinning uselessly as the front end careens toward a ditch. Cars are meant for pavement, for the smooth space on the Interstate or the blacktop state highways, for places where a driver has to think less about driving. But if you are a confident driver --- and Dale Gerhardt is --- then the unpaved roads are worth the adventure and the wear, because they provide the fastest way to anywhere in Midland County. Dale's car isn't a shining beauty: small flowers of rust bloom on the hood, barely visible around the dark blue paint; the white braces on the side of the hardtop have yellowed with sun and dust, and the windshield has a tiny gravel pockmark at the bottom of the passenger's side. Inside, though, the vinyl seats are smooth, the dashboard meticulously cleaned with Armor All, no paper cups or cans littering the floorboards, and when he slides the key in it starts. It always starts.

He loves the car because it's his own. He's not a master machanic: he can change the oil himself, of course, after all the years of watching his dad keep up their tractor, and if a belt slips or a tire pops, yeah, he's ready, but the guys at school who can talk for hours about cylinders and fuel injectors and all of that, the guys who've been tinkering with his car during shop class — no thanks, man. All he wants from a car is what he's got, an easy relationship with the steering wheel and the gas pedal, a radio that picks up the stations out of Salina and Hutchinson with some regularity, windows that crank down, and a back seat shrouded in shadow no matter where he parks.

Today, he takes the county road (what the Post Office calls Rural Route #5) south from his place, follows the curve of the river east (now Avenue T), then doubles-back north on a narrower, less-used road (RR#4) and takes it to the highway, ending up a mile from where his parents turned to take that same highway into time. He looks both ways, sees no traffic, and is relieved. Good. They think he's going to Jim's place for the afternoon; all the better if there's no witness to tell them otherwise. He speeds across the paved highway and straight back into sand, takes the road up another section to a thin, weedy path, not even a road, that's mainly used by tractors and the twice-yearly collection trucks. He turns here and drives slowly, because the road has dried into deep furrows, and he doesn't want to

hit a bump and careen into the ditch. If he gets the car stuck, he'll have to see Kay's dad about pulling it out. Then all of his attempts at secrecy will be blown.

So he lets the car idle down the road, and it takes him a few minutes to pull up to the next crossroad - old RR#5, the one he started on, only a mile north from his place. He's at the northeast corner of the Wedel property, facing a stack of wide round bales. It surprises him now to see a black sedan driving past on the highway, going slow, the men in the car looking out at the pasture as though taking a tour. They turn left at the crossroad, driving the perimeter of the Wedel farm, and Dale waits until they're out of sight before he makes his own turn, south, toward the road that leads to the house. He doesn't take the main path, though, but the next lane, another thin route meant just for tractors, and he settles his car behind a row of bales, invisible from the road and from the house, because the barn blocks the view. He'll go the rest of the way quietly on foot.

The farmyard is empty except for an old dog licking itself in the shade at the end of the porch. To the east, Dale can see the cattle penned in the pasture, huddled by the shelterbelt where their chances for shade are best; to the south, in a separate pasture, he can just make out the old white-and-tawny bull that the Wedels have had since he was a boy. He used to think that bull was the fiercest

thing in three counties, maybe because he saw it charge August Wedel's truck when they were out throwing bales to the cattle once, or maybe because his father had set him on a fence post, once, and told him that if he fell that bull would kill him faster than anything he could think of.

"Bulls run on a different logic," his father said. "All they know are threats and breeders. If you ain't one, you're another. You get me?"

At seven, Dale hadn't understood at all, but ten years later, he feels a strange sympathy — maybe even a little envy — of the bull. How nice, he thinks as he turns off the car, to have things so neatly divided.

The Wedel house is smaller than their own, but not by much - it's a two-story affair, and as Dale walks across the yard, he imagines her in the second-floor room, her slender hand drawing back the lace curtains —leftovers from when she was a teenager — and looking over the dirt yard in front of the implement shed, then maybe catching sight of his blue-sleeved letter jacket and smiling. Maybe saying his name to herself. Maybe. Or maybe she saw the car before he was even in the yard, heard its familiar rumble, maybe in her mind she's already in it, maybe they're halfway to Newton by now, halfway to the A&W by the highway where they had their first tentative date two months ago, a town far enough away that the waitress who smacked her gum by the car window was a stranger. They could go back there today,

he thinks, or they can go to the river. It's hot enough for it, and if they drive out a ways, he knows a nice spot that none of the kids from the high school will try, a spot where they can be alone.

The window is closed, though, and the curtains don't flutter as he approaches. He raps on the door, and the dog turns, sniffs, continues to ignore him. He's a common sight on the Wedel front porch, recently, sneaking over when August is busy to pick Kay up and take her out. This is his plan today.

It surprises him when August answers the door, his expression puzzled. He should be at the meeting, Dale thinks. All the adults are supposed to be in town.

"Dale?" he prompts. "You need something, son?"

"Uh, hello, Mr. Wedel," he says. Dale smiles, tilts his head, removes his hat. They've talked about this, what to say. "I was looking for your daughter. I had some questions I needed to ask, she said she might have some time to help me with my college applications."

"Oh, sure," August says, and he nods. "Well, come on in. You drive over? I didn't hear anybody pull up."

"Yes, sir," he says, following August inside. He hangs his hat on the coat tree by the entrance. "Parked in the shade over there a ways. Got those leather seats that get too hot in the sun. Too hot to sit on."

“Too hot for just about everything,” August says.

“Can’t even get the truck running today. Was gonna take it into town, but - doesn’t seem worth the trouble.”

“Sure,” Dale says. “I wondered - my parents left for that meeting a while back, wasn’t sure I’d find anyone home.”

August shrugs. “Kay’s in the dining room, think she’s working on grading papers. Kay, Dale Gerhardt’s here.”

He hears a stir of papers from the dining room, steps around the coat tree to turn into the room, and there she is. She’s beautiful, her hair in blondish curls, damp at her forehead, and her skin pale except for a blush of color on her cheeks. Kay is finely built, a trim waist and narrow shoulders and thin, delicate wrists, but when she stands, she’s not much shorter than he is, and he feels the same strange swirl of wonder and tenderness and anxiety that he always does when he sees her in school.

“Dale,” she says, her voice high, a little surprised. “Hello.”

“Hi, Kay.” She frowns as he uses her name, but he shrugs. He called her Kay when she was 12 and he was 8 and their mothers used to get together for coffee in this same house; he’s not going to call her Miss Wedel here, not even with her father listening from the living room. “I thought I might see if you have time to help me with some college applications.”

He realizes too late that he's brought nothing with him, none of the actual applications that he's supposed to be filling out. They're in his room, on his desk, in a neat folder that she gave him at the end of the last school year. He puts a hand down on the dining table, his fingers brushing a stack of notebook paper assignments, and he looks down to see if the names are familiar, if he could maybe lift a few of these just for something to hold.

"I - actually, I'm in the middle of grading things, right now," she says, her voice terribly formal even if her face is flushed. It's her school voice. In school it's all different — Kay is different, definite, her voice deeper, her smiles harder, everything about her sterner and harder to approach. Now, though, he's aware that under her buttoned-up blue-plaid shirt there's warm ivory skin, probably a satiny bra holding her breasts, each just the perfect size of his hands. In school he tries not to think about that, tries and usually fails, and so it's her formality that works to keep things separated, her control that keeps him from reaching out. In school he tries to think of her as Miss Wedel, tries to play along. Here, though, just the two of them standing in the dim dining room, August probably absorbed in the radio farm reports back in the living room, all he thinks is, here's my girl, and he grins down at her and puts his hand on her waist.

“What are you doing?” she asks, but doesn’t pull away.

“We could go for a drive,” he says. “Just tell him you need to get some things from the school.”

She shakes her head and steps back. “I can’t,” she whispers, and then, more loudly, “We were just getting ready to leave.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “We were going for a drive,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

He blinks. “I thought your dad said the truck’s broken.”

She frowns. “We’re taking my car. To McPherson.”

Her mother, he thinks, and nods. “Well, OK, then,” he says. “Maybe we could talk sometime later this week?”

“Of course,” she says. “Why don’t you stop in after school tomorrow, and we can look things over.” In her eyes, there a small apology, and he nods. He feels, suddenly, a little foolish, not just because he’s playacting in the Wedel’s dining room, but because he came all this way. Then she rests her hand on his elbow as he turns, and he looks down and sees her blushing and smiling and shaking her head all at the same time, and he smiles back and that’s better. Tomorrow’s not so far away, after all. If he heads out now, he can go into town, see if any of the guys are

playing basketball behind the school, at least do something for fun before he's due home for supper.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she says, and he nods, quickly, and winks.

Back in the entryway, he pauses to put on his hat, then ducks into the living room to wave good-bye to August. He's sitting in an old rocking chair by the window, flipping through a magazine, the radio running low next to him. Not a bad way to spend a Sunday for an old guy, probably, Dale thinks. August looks up when he steps into the room.

"Say, on my way in, I saw some guys having a good look at your northeast pasture," Dale says, and August nods.

"You looking to sell that old bull or something?"

"Oh, I don't imagine anyone would take him," he says.

"What'd they look like?"

Dale shrugs. "Driving a black sedan, that was about all I saw. Young guys, looked like."

"Yep." He looks north, away from Dale, like he could maybe see through the wall. "Maybe they were lost."

"Could be," Dale agrees. He tips his hat from the back. "Have a good afternoon. Sorry to bother you."

"Well, hell, no bother to me," August says. "Tell your folks hello."

"I will," he promises. He hears the papers shuffle again as he walks to the front door, but he doesn't pause. On the walk to the car, he imagines, again, that she's

watching him, and this time, when he looks at the window - the first-floor window - he's sure that he sees her there.

* * *

Harold and Hannah cross the parking lot to the shady spot in the back where Harold parked. Harold's footsteps across the lot are swift, his strides so long that Hannah is left behind, and she doesn't mind, doesn't try and keep up. Let him work out a little of his frustration on the way to the truck, that's fine.

Behind her, the other folks are still milling at the doors, their complaints shifting from the meeting to the heat, the brightness of the day. What'd they expect, she wonders, shaking her head. August in Kansas, it's gonna be hot, physical, wet hot. Everyone acting like they just got here, like they're surprised by the heat and humidity, well, it gets on her nerves. And a day as hot as this, it gets on her last nerve, almost, that nerve she should be saving to hear her husband bellyache on the way home about the meeting.

Not that she agrees with the military men. Not really. Only she can see their point, can see where having missiles out in this area, this so-called magic circle unreachable by Soviet rockets, that makes some sense to her. It's a little like laying away peaches for the winter in the cellar, then buying them tinned at the store during the fall. Four out

of five winters maybe it never gets so bad you can't make it in to the store, but it's that fifth winter you plan for. It's the winter when it snows so hard you can't get out of the driveway, even with the tractor to pull you. Then you need those peaches, and you're glad you held them back. It was her mother who told her that, and she aims to make that point if she gets a chance.

The pickup doors are unlocked, keys resting in the ashtray on a bed of used toothpicks. Harold has the truck started before Hannah climbs into her seat. She looks straight ahead, not over at him.

"Thought we might have hamburger steaks for supper," she says. "Unless you want to stop at the store, I can get chicken. Didn't have time to butcher today."

"No, hell no," he says. His boot clunks against the clutch and then the truck lurches forward, rumbling out of the lot in a cloud of diesel fumes and gravel dust. "Let's just get back, I've got work to do."

She nods and lowers her window, waves idly at a family waiting on the corner near the church. Harold huffs and shifts into third gear before they're even past the school building. Hannah doesn't blame him; she found the Air Force boy a little thick, too. But she can see the way of things already: What the Air Force wants, the Air Force is going to get. No matter what Pastor Irvin might say about the power of prayer, it's not going to get them anywhere against tanks

and missiles. It's only going to get them to exactly where they already are.

A mile out of town, they see a black sedan pulled onto the thin shoulder, steam streaming from the front, and a man struggling with the hood. Hannah recognizes the captain's uniform pants at the same time Harold curses. The man - the one who did all the talking - stands up straight and looks at them as they roll past.

"Harold," Hannah says, and turns to face him.

"Serves them right," he says.

"You know the next car this way is likely to be the pastor," she says, and he sighs and slows down. He turns slows, then does a clumsy three-point turn without looking for traffic. When he stops the truck on the opposite side of the road, the captain is leaning against the front fender, mopping his brow on his sleeve. Hannah can see the other young man still sitting in the car, where it must be even warmer. She waves, and the captain nods; the other boy is staring straight ahead.

"All right," Harold says, and steps out of the truck and walks across. She doesn't get out. No need. Instead she watches them, Harold with his hat still on, the captain having to squint at him, his hand gesturing to the car once or twice. Harold's nod is decisive, and a moment later he's walking back to her.

Harold comes back, says, "Drive over to Jerry's, get some water, see if he's got some antifreeze to spare. Get his funnel, too." He shakes his head, a little smirk lifting the edge of his mouth, and meets her eye. "Can't be driving in hundred-degree weather without any water in your radiator. Guess they don't teach that up in military school."

She slides across the seat and Harold watches her get herself settled in with the wheel lowered, and then she nods and waves and he steps back to let her pull away. She executes a neater, swifter three-point turn, and starts for Jerry and Pamela's place, just down the section. She smiles a little as she leaves. Turns out she won't have to listen to Harold's bellyaching after all. He'll probably get that out of his system real quick with those boys.

After Hannah pulls away, it's just the three men on the highway, Harold with his hat secured, the younger men sweating, bare-headed, their uniform hats and jackets back in the car.

"We really appreciate this," the captain says.

"Oh, sure," Harold says. He walks to the front of the car and braces his hands on car body, looks down at the engine. The captain leans next to him and then snaps back, rubbing his hands. Harold glances over. "You burn yourself?" he asks, not moving his hands from the metal.

“It’s fine,” he says, and returns to his same position, but this time just crosses his arms. He nods toward the engine. “Must’ve sprung a leak on the way out. Hit something, maybe.”

Harold shrugs. “You see a big spot under it at the church?”

“Didn’t really look, but I think I’d notice,” the captain says.

I doubt that, Harold thinks, but he keeps his head down. The engine is particularly poorly kept. “You got a belt about to go,” Harold says. “You guys have any mechanics out there?”

“Yeah, we got a motor pool,” the captain says. “But they’re pretty busy with other things.”

“Missiles and stuff,” Harold says, turning to lean back against the car. “I can see where that’d take up your time.”

The younger officer steps up. He’s got a pale face and looks like he hasn’t seen the outdoors in his whole life. “You live near here?” he asks, dabbing the collar of his sleeve against his forehead.

“Yep,” Harold says, but doesn’t offer a direction. He’s not sure exactly what the boys are doing out on this road, anyway; if they’re looking for the Interstate, it’s the other way. Maybe they’re headed out to the Wedel place. If so, the fastest route to the house was the last turn. He

should maybe tell them, he thinks, but just says, "Grew up around here, too."

"It's pretty country," the young one says. The captain rubs his neck with one hand, dries it on his pants.

"Sure is," Harold says. The boy is standing in the middle of the lane, his polished shoes already scuffed from the pressed gravel. "Where are you from?"

"Minnesota," the boy says, and Harold laughs.

"Well, you're quite a ways from home, then, huh?" He nods. The air around him shimmers with heat rising from the road. Not even enough sense to stand on the shoulder.

"What do your folks do?"

He shrugs. "This and that," he says. "Dad does mostly sales."

"Yeah? Never had much use for salesmen out here." The boy starts. "I don't mean anything against your father," Harold says, "just we don't have much use for that kind of business out this way. Everything I ever bought, it's because something else wore out. Don't really need anyone trying to tell me what's good, what's not, you know?"

"I guess," the boy says.

"Got just about everything I need," Harold says.

The captain clears his throat. "Did your wife have to go far?"

“No, just up the next section, there,” Harold says. “Ought to be able to get some coolant from Jerry. Doesn’t look like you’ve quite ruined anything yet, so you might even make it back to Wichita.” He smiles and squints over at the young one again. “How long you been down there?”

“Near a year.” The boy squares his shoulders. “I like it,” he volunteers.

“Well, Wichita, that’s a whole other place than here, huh?” Harold says. “I was down there once a few years ago, they’ve got an implement dealer south of town, near Wellington, does a pretty good deal on the International parts. You an International man?”

“I try to buy American,” he says.

“International Harvester,” the captain says. “My grandfather’s a Deere man.”

Harold turns to look at him. He’s still got his arms crossed, but he’s turned, at least, so he’s not facing into the sun anymore, and he’s not standing in the middle of the road like his friend. Maybe there’s some sense in there.

“That so? What parts are your people from?”

“Arkansas,” he says.

“Farmers?”

He shrugs. “Not anymore,” he says, and Harold looks down at the captain’s red hand. The fingernails are short but clean, a lot like his hair. It’s hard to imagine this

boy on a farm, hard to imagine him in anything but a stiff grayish uniform and a military-issued scowl.

“They get chased off?” Harold asks.

“All their tractors died,” he says, and shakes his head. “Listen,” he says, in that somber Army voice that’s supposed to impress him or make him fearful or something, Harold knows. He straightens up himself. Maybe the pastor’s car will be the next one by, but until then, Harold gets to speak his mind, and God forgive him.

“You want to say something, son?” Harold asks. He’s a good two inches shorter than the captain, but his shoulders might as well be twice as broad. Harold’s seen enough bulls fight in his time to know that brawn is to his advantage, that whatever they’re training these boys in down in Wichita, he’s tougher, he’s older, he’s got experience that means everything out here.

The captain looks at him, then shakes his head, a dismissive shake, almost, and steps back. “It must be, what, a hundred and twenty out here? Jesus.”

“Something close to it,” Harold agrees.

He looks around, one hand shielding his eyes. With his back turned, he says, “You guys do away with the trees for fun?”

“Well, it’s easier to see the Russians coming without them,” Harold says, and the captain laughs and turns back around.

“You know,” he says, “they’re going to put it in no matter what. They’ve got to have it. We’ve got to have it. They’re already setting up all over in Nebraska, all over in Arkansas.”

Harold shrugs. He can see his truck on the horizon, rising out of a heat mirage. “You know, they said about the same thing to my uncle a few years back, when they wanted to dam up the river, make a lake out of his homestead.”

The boy in the road steps to the shoulder as the noise of the truck cuts through the air. He looks surprised, like he never realized he might be in danger.

“And so what’d he do?” the captain asks.

“Nothing,” Harold says. “Just rolled over and took it.”

Hannah pulls in, parks on the opposite side and sets the brake. Harold looks both ways before he crosses the road. The captain’s right there with him, and together they get the crate of supplies out of the back. “So, what,” the captain says. Harold looks at him. “Why didn’t he do anything?”

Harold reaches under the hood and twists off the radiator cap. It’s hot enough to burn, but he does it anyway, doesn’t reach for the rag that’s hanging on the side of the crate. He draws back with the cap in his hand and

watches the captain spill water into the funnel and down into the engine. The radiator hisses as he pours.

“That’s his way,” Harold says. He hands the boy a plastic jug of coolant. “People don’t fight, here. Not too many who believe in it.” He glances around. The other boy is at the pickup, talking to Hannah, both of them out of earshot. “But I’ll tell you something, son,” Harold says, ducking under the hood so they’re close, so it might look, to a neighbor or the pastor, like he’s just there to show the boy a trick, to help him out. “God might want a lake, but he sure as hell doesn’t want a missile.”

The boy glances over at him just briefly, but it’s enough that he spills coolant over the edge of the funnel onto the black metal radiator. “Whoops,” Harold says, taking a step back. “That’ll probably smell a little on your way back, but I can’t imagine it’ll be too much worse than it was.”

When he looks up, Hannah’s glancing back, giving him a look like maybe she’s heard everything or can guess what he’s said, and that’s probably true. Well, he figures, stacking the empty quarts in the crate, he’s got nothing to apologize for. A man should never have to apologize for the truth.

After the hood is closed again and the car has been started, Harold advises they keep the heater running on the way home. It probably won’t help, he thinks, but it can’t

hurt, except in terms of comfort. He stands in the road to watch them make their three point turn, headed back the right way, then climbs behind the wheel of his own truck.

“You give them good directions back where they came from?” Harold asks.

“Sure,” she says. “Not hard to get turned around out here.”

At the farm, he heads toward the barn without a word and she turns to the house. The meat has defrosted on the counter, and she makes quick work of dividing it into long, thin patties, hardly even thinking as she adds salt and pepper, sets it in the wide heavy skillet she uses for just about everything. She pours a can of green beans into another pan and chips some ham pieces into them while she's waiting for the skillet to heat.

Her kitchen is organized for swift dinners and suppers, and she finds the routine of preparation soothing. Everything is exactly where she's left it, the advantage of being the only woman in the house.

Harold likes his meat well done, crispy at the edges, which is an easy way to cook everything. Their boy Dale, who should be home by now, eats anything she puts in front of him (and anything she leaves on the counter, and anything left in the icebox, and anything open in the pantry), so she just cooks all the meat until the steaks are as dark as the skillet, then forks them onto a platter and adds a little milk and flour to the pan to turn the fat into gravy. She has another two pounds of hamburger for tomorrow's meals, and as she scrapes up the crispy bits and whisks them in with the milky gravy, she decides she'll do a casserole for supper, patties surrounded by rice and tomato soup from the can. Easy enough, and it won't heat the place up too terribly. The gravy starts to thicken and she whisks it a

few more times, then pours it into a dish and sets it on the table next to the green beans, bread, and a pitcher of sun tea.

Harold stomps in like he's been called, the sweet smell of the barn thick around him, his hands dripping from being washed at the pump outside. He sits at the table and picks up the knife she laid out, starts cutting thick slices from a loaf of her whole-wheat bread. She sets jam and butter next to him and takes her own seat. "I imagine we can go ahead," she says, and he nods. They say the quick, rote grace she's been saying since she was a child: "Bless the food we now partake, bless our health, for Jesus's sake."

"Amen," Harold says, his voice finding volume on that last note. He cuts a pat of butter, smears it across his bread, then sticks the same knife in the jam jar and repeats the process. Something about this food, its smell and consistency, is calming, just like the heft of hay in the barn was a balm after the meeting. Hannah bakes every Monday, rain or shine, heat or snow, the same four loaves of wheat bread, two pans of cinnamon rolls, and two dozen zwieback rolls every week, with extras to take to church once a month. Her bread is the best in the county, and he's proud of that, glad to have a wife so proficient in this quintessential German art. It gives him something to talk about when he sees women from church in town, gives him something to say — you boys try those rolls, now, don't let

them go to waste — to the kids who sometimes stumble into their place after school with his son.

“Where’s Dale?” he asks around a bite of bread.

“He and the Zerger boy were going out to the lake this afternoon,” Hannah says.

It baffles him, all this time that Dale seems to find in his days, time to go to the lake, time to run around the county in the car he’s been tinkering on with the high school shop class, time to take in a movie on the weekends with one pretty girl or another, and still time for football and church. They’ve indulged him, Harold knows; he wonders if they haven’t let the boy get too far from home. But everything seems to get done. His grades are all good, the reports from his teachers all real nice, and next year he’ll be in college and he’ll have to buckle down. Besides, there’s not that much for him to do on the place, most times. Harold does all right with keeping things running himself, after all. He did it all those years before Dale was old enough to help.

“Should’ve been back by now,” Harold says, holding the bread in mid-air. “He thinks I’m always going to feed that bay, he’s got another thing coming.”

“Sure,” Hannah says, nodding mildly. She’s been out to feed Dale’s horse twice this week herself. Boys will be boys, though; she can remember her mother picking up after her brothers in the same way. Harold’s family was different

- his mother was never much of a presence in their house, held captive by headaches and pains for years. Sometimes, in the creak of the stairs and the constant whistle of the wind around the doorframes, she understands what might have driven that woman to keep to her bed for so much of the time, what might have made her see the end as such a relief when it came - just after they were married. What a relief it might have been. But the trick is in keeping busy. That's what Hannah's mother told her when she was married, what she said again after Hannah's third miscarriage, what she probably was saying just before she keeled over in her kitchen, in the middle of whipping egg whites for a lemon meringue pie, three years ago. You stay busy.

She looks up and across at Harold. He's staring down at his steak, and as she watches he cuts a bite free with his fork, stabs it and then a couple of green beans, swipes them all through the gravy, and shoves it in his mouth. "Slow up," she says, and he looks up like he's surprised. They've had the same argument for 28 years, now; he eats too fast, sees the food like an obstacle to getting back to the real meat of his days in the fields. She doesn't spend even half the time she used to on cooking, but she still wants a little more conversation, a little more care, than this. "You haven't said much since the meeting."

"I just said a whole bunch of words," he says, taking a gulp of his water. He reaches for a second slice of bread, and she hands him Dale's clean knife for the butter.

"I meant what you thought," she says. "You talk yourself hoarse with those boys on the road?"

"Oh, we got on fine," Harold says. "That younger one, he's from Minnesota."

"Long way from home." Hannah's looking evenly across at him. "I suppose that's how they got turned around out here."

"I suppose," he agrees. "Makes you worry, though, when the military boys can't read a map. Might start digging in the wrong place."

She takes a drink of her iced tea. "You know, I haven't seen Melissa Wedel in weeks, not even at the pie social. I should have thought something about that, but she never was much for socializing."

He nods. "Thought he was going to sell out to Lester, maybe."

Hannah shakes her head. "There's been bad blood there since Lester's mother died." These men never listen, she thinks. They just don't know how to pay attention. It's almost pitiable, how they track through in oblivion, how they think the only stories that matter are those they tell each other out in the fields or at their Saturday morning coffees in town. Would it hurt so much to pick up a phone,

once in a while? Would it hurt so much to ride along on a Sunday afternoon to drop off a pie, a casserole, to take a few minutes in someone else's house and learn the lay of the land there? And how much better, then, not to be caught by surprise like this. "Maybe she's ill again."

"Crazy, I think you mean," Harold says, shaking his head.

Hannah spares him a glare. "She's had her troubles."

"Where's their girls at, then?"

"Come on, think," Hannah says. Harold looks up, and she's surprised by how genuinely puzzled he seems. "The oldest one's teaching at the high school," she says. "She teaches Dale's science class."

"Oh, yeah," he says, and shrugs. He spears a green bean with his fork. "Well, he's had about four of them teachers already."

"She's helping him with his college work," Hannah says, and Harold nods like he remembers this.

"What about the little one?" Harold asks.

"Last I heard, in Salina, at beauty school. Doesn't come back much." Hannah shakes her head. "Anyway, I wonder they won't move to town, now."

"Imagine so," he says. He takes a final bite of the beans. "I imagine they're going to make a big old mess of the place. Hell, he just had that ditch redug last fall." He knows the Wedel place almost like his own; he grew up

trekking over their land to get to the river to fish, or to trade their eggs for old Mrs. Wedel's milk when his mother needed extra. It's good land when they're getting the right amount of rain, but August's had a run of bad luck: his wife's been in and out of the hospital as long as Harold's know her, which can't be free; floods the last two years have taken out his corn, and last spring's hail ruined everyone's wheat crop; and the new combine he bought after the bumper crops of '59 has been probably taxing his bank accounts something terrible. The government sure didn't pay out enough on crop insurance to allow for that machinery. Harold shakes his head and reaches for more bread. "It's not like they're gonna get anywhere."

"They sounded like they got some plans to get exactly where they want," Hannah says.

Harold laughs. "You hear that man say anything about the water table? Boy, I might just take the day off and go over to watch them dig. Might just take a sandwich and wait for the look on their face when they figure out they've got a missile going into an underground lake." Harold laughs again and cleans up the last of the gravy with a crust of bread. "Gonna be a fine old lesson for them."

Hannah shakes her head. Her own steak is only half-eaten. "You don't imagine they've thought about that?"

"I don't imagine they've thought about much of anything," he says. "Safety, my foot. Putting big

rockets in where we ought to be planting wheat. Let those people out on the coasts tear up their fancy houses, if they're so worried. We'll see a Russian on our land the same day we see the ocean." He takes a gulp of his tea and drains half the glass. "It wouldn't hurt them so much to listen, but no, no one has the time for the stupid old farmers. Hell of a thing."

The back door bangs open and Hannah starts. She didn't hear Dale's car, which has a bang-and-clang all its own, coming up the drive, and now she whirls to make sure it's him. Sure enough, she sees a flash of gray shirt and blue jeans around the corner, heading for the stairs. "You'd better have those muddy shoes off," she calls, hearing him tromp up the stairs, and Harold smirks.

"A life's work, keeping the farm out of a farmhouse," he says, and stands up. He drinks the rest of his tea and sets the glass back on the table, then says, "You tell him I'll be in the barn."

Hannah nods. She gathers his plate and hers and rinses them at the sink, listening for the thud of Dale's feet on the stairs. When he swings into the kitchen, he pauses to drop a kiss to the side of her face. "Hiya, Ma," he says. He falls into his chair with such gusto that it slides an inch or two across the plank floor.

“You don’t smell like the lake,” she says, handing him a fresh knife. He’s already heaping beans next to his steak.

“Changed plans. Jim had to work, so I went into town.” He zips up and over to the refrigerator, grabs the ketchup bottle and falls again to his seat. Everything about her boy is energy, these days, everything done at a full-out run. No surprise, maybe; he’s got to put that food to work somewhere, she figures, handing him a glass of water.

He doesn’t volunteer where he’s been and Hannah smiles to herself, sponging her own plate clean in the sink. Probably off with Haley Miller, she thinks, and doesn’t mind so much. She’s a good girl. Hannah’s seen them flirting a little in church, and she and Dee Miller have quietly consulted and agreed they make a handsome pair. “Your father’s out in the barn,” she says, trying to make her tone stern. “Think he’d like to see you for a bit. Something about your horse?”

“Always gotta see a man about a horse,” Dale says, and laughs to himself.

“Seems lately you gotta see a man about something, most of the time,” she says, drying the plates. She turns to look at him. “Would it hurt to stay close to home once in a while? Remind your folks what you look like.”

His whole plate is smeared with ketchup but his face is clean, his teeth bright when he smiles up at her. "Ma, you miss me now, think about next year. I'm just trying to get you used to it."

She shakes her head but smiles back. Next year is college. They have some money for it, money Harold keeps careful track of in his bankbook. Lately, she's seen him checking the figures at least once a week, and his anxiety is somehow endearing. College was something they agreed on when Dale was still tiny. She thought then it was a consolation of Harold's, a promise that this one child they'd been able to make would have an easier life, a life safe from all the dangers on a farm that could take him away from them. For her, that's still the reason, still the motivation, but she's sensed recently something else from Harold: an urgency and concern that she has yet to track down. She wonders if it isn't competition, Harold wanting to get the best of his brother Frank by making sure their boy gets to college before Frank's oldest, Zachary.

"Have you seen your cousin lately?" she asks.

Dale looks up from eating beans directly from the serving dish. "In school," he says, and shrugs.

"We're going over there Saturday. Might be good you came along." She waits for him to look up at her. She expects some resistance - he usually has something planned

on Saturday nights - but he just nods, says a quiet OK.

"You should be nice to him," she says.

"Yeah, he's got it pretty rough," Dale says, with a sour twist in his voice that is pure Harold. He eats another mouthful of beans, then stands, his chair nearly toppling backwards. "Dad's in the barn?" he asks, his mouth still food.

She nods, lifting his plate, and by the time she has it set in the sink, he's out the door. With the men gone, she turns back to the table, picks up her fork, and finishes the green beans slowly, then clears the counters and pulls out the flour tin, the sugar, the oil. A piecrust, she thinks, and peaches. Tomorrow afternoon, she'll take it over to Melissa Wedel's place herself, get the whole story.

Outside there's a full harvest moon just sliding up the horizon, big and golden-red, and Dale pauses to watch it and to light a cigarette. He smokes next to his car, where he can drop the butt into the ashtray if his father comes near. It's not that his father is opposed to smoking, just to throwing the butts on the ground, where the chickens might find them or, worse, where a spark might carry out into the dry fields. He leans on the car, which is still warm from the sun. It wasn't the afternoon he had planned, but it went OK, not a bad game with his friends. Saved himself

some gas, too. He's been burning too much gas, recently, driving up to Hutchinson or Newton every time he and Kay want a meal together; it's eating into his savings from last summer's work, little by little, but it's worth it. Another year and they won't have to sneak around like this anymore, once he graduates and isn't Kay's student anymore. He ducks into the car to stub out his cigarette and thinks he can smell her perfume on the seat, from the last trip they took, and he pauses, then grins over at his own reflection in the side mirror. One more year and everything around here is going to change.

He slides open the heavy barn door, his hands bringing a light dust of rust back from the handle. It groans and doesn't open easy, makes enough noise he knows his father's heard him come in. Harold doesn't look down, though, from shifting hay in the loft. He's like this when he works - silent, absorbed, his face frozen in a perpetual serious scowl. It used to scare the daylights out of Dale as a boy, but now he knows better. Harold's all bark, no bite. Dale grabs a pitchfork and climbs up to join him. They work silently in the dim upper barn, never getting in each other's way, with the practiced coordination of men used to each other and their work. They shift the small bales once a week when they're storing it up here, to make sure nothing's getting any mold, make sure it's all staying dry. The feed in the barn is mostly for the horses; they keep the

hay for cattle out in the pastures, risking the weather because cattle have tougher stomachs. Moldy hay can kill a horse; a little rot, though, generally doesn't do the cattle too much damage.

When the bales are reset, Dale looks over at his father to see what's left to do. Harold wipes a flood of sweat from his forehead with the back of his red, calloused hand. His hands are swollen, his fingers stiff, and he flexes them out slowly, looking down at the burn from the radiator cap. That was pretty stupid, he thinks, and when Dale looks over at him he holds it up.

"What'd you do?" Dale asks.

"Messing around on a car. Stupid. Had to help the military boys out - dumb as posts, those two." He shakes his head.

"How was the meeting?"

"Helluva thing," Harold says. "Gonna put in a missile out here. Couple of guys came to tell us all about it, then messed up their car trying to leave."

"What kind of car?"

"Sedan," Harold says. He's never been much for vehicles that can't haul something.

Dale looks down. It must be the same sedan he saw around Kay's place, but that doesn't make much sense. August wasn't even at the meeting. "You helped them fix it?"

“Yeah, added some water. Your mother gave 'em directions back to the highway.” He wipes his brow again and leans on his pitchfork. It might still be a hundred some degrees at the top of that barn. This was probably a little too much work to do right after supper, and a warm supper, on top of that. His stomach is churning a little. He spits onto the floor below, unties his handkerchief from his neck and wipes his face with it.

“Pop?” Dale says, and Harold blinks over at him. He feels like he's been standing too long, suddenly wants to take a seat on the nearest hay bale, maybe, just for a moment. Instead, he sticks his pitchfork into the last pile and points at the outer yard.

“You think maybe that horse should go hungry?” Harold asks.

Dale shakes his head, grateful for the chance to get away. Sounds like he had a narrow miss this afternoon, if his father and mother were anywhere near where that sedan was. He'll have to be more careful in the future. Maybe start walking over there or something.

He climbs down from the loft one-handed, holding the pitchfork in his other hand. Last summer he worked four afternoons a week at the Co-op grain elevator, stirring grain in the big metal tanks by climbing the scorching outside ladders all the way to the top, five stories up, the highest point in two counties. Since then, this rickety

ladder, once the forbidden adventure of his childhood, has seemed a sight less impressive. He jumps the last three rungs altogether and lands squarely on the straw-dusted plank floor, then hangs the pitchfork up on the near wall. Harold nailed stakes up to organize their equipment a few years ago, but there's no real order to how things are hung up - pitchforks next to old saw blades, rakes separated by shovels, a sledgehammer that often gets propped up wherever it's last been used. When he has a place of his own, Dale will fix this. He'll put his things in order, organize everything alphabetically, maybe, or even by frequency of use, rarely used tools at the back, something like that. This is what he thinks about - the wonderful efficiency of well-organized tools, everything so neatly aligned in a fresh-raised barn that a man could find a hammer in the dark - as he rakes hay into the manger.

“Pop,” Dale says, bent to free a snag of twine on his rake, “which tool you think we use the most?”

“What's that?” Harold has paused again, this time at the bottom of the ladder. He's getting old, Dale thinks. This lethargy isn't so unusual of late; after-dinner chores are never his strength. He wakes too early, another thing he'll turn around when he's got his own place. Waking before dawn just means you're useless by 8 o'clock, and Dale's not having that. No, when he and Kay get a place, he'll get things so well fixed it won't take all day to do

things. He'll have a good breakfast with his wife and be back in early enough at night to take his time at dinner, take his time with his wife, too.

Harold shuffles over and leans the pitchfork against the western wall - not even the wall with the pegs, not even close. "Which tool you think we use most?" Dale asks again.

"What, today?"

"No, I mean, in general."

Harold stares at him, and Dale wonders if he's going to grouse, if this seems too frivolous a question, but then Harold just takes his hat off and wipes his hand over his forehead and hair before he settles it on again. "Well, that saw blade was your granddaddy's," he says. "I imagine it's seen about the most work."

Dale glances at the rusting blade, then shakes his head. "That's not what I mean," he says. "Which do you think we use the most?"

Harold looks puzzled. "I'd guess the hammer, then," he says. "If I had to do with only one, maybe that and the screwdrivers. That what you mean?"

"Yeah, close enough."

Harold nods. "Course it depends on the season. Not much use for the pitchforks come winter, but the shovels get real valuable."

Well, that's a good point. Maybe he can figure out a seasonal organization, Dale muses, looking over the tools again.

"What are you wondering for?" Harold asks.

Harold already has Dale's future planned: college, then medical school like his uncle Frank or maybe law school like Harold's buddy Mac Kepler. If Dale mentions he wants to stay put, farm like his father does, well, it just restarts this same old fight, and Dale isn't up for it tonight. "Just thinkin' how many hours we've spent with those forks," he says.

Harold snorts. "Not enough for you, recently," he says. He shakes his head and pounds a fist against his rib, lets loose a good belch. "Ought to have a word with your mother about whatever she's been putting in our dinner," he says, and shakes his head. "See you check that leg. We ought to get that horse back to pasture soon or she's likely to forget what it's like out there."

"Yeah," Dale says. He hangs up the rake and turns to get his grain bucket, spills in a half-pound or so of the corn-oat mix they give the horses as a treat. "She seems all right up here, though."

Harold shakes his head, walks past Dale and heaves the barn door open. "Horses don't want to be kept in a barn," he says. "Not in their nature."

Exactly, Dale thinks as he hears his father's steps crunch across the yard. Horses want to run, and farm kids want to farm. Maybe his father thinks he's better suited to city work, but Dale knows that a quick guy on a farm could make a challenge out of that every day, and a pile of money, too.

He carries the bucket to the far door and then into the corral. His horse is up here because she had a cut on her right forelock a few weeks ago and they're keeping an eye on it, though it's already past scabbing and starting to grow over. She doesn't favor the leg at all. Dale's still keeping her close, because there are cougars around; Jim Zerger saw one just last week. Besides, when the horse is all the way down in the big pasture Dale's less likely to have time to fit a ride in after school.

The horse is standing at the far end of the corral, nearest the evergreen trees that border the house and barnyard. When Dale steps out she twitches an ear his way to show she's watching, probably, though otherwise she barely moves. In the dusky twilight he can just see the star between the horse's eyes and the strip of white leading a few inches down her otherwise brown nose, like a falling star on her dark serious face. That's where she got his name, Comet, from the Saline County boys who sold her as a colt. Harold doesn't use the name. He never uses names with horses, in fact, calls them all by their colors - his

own is a spunky silver; Dale's is *the bay* - or by bland diminutives, old girl, old boy. Dale explained this to Kay once, and she laughed and said it was a wonder Dale had a name at all.

He carries the pail out, shaking the grain around to get Comet's attention. He stops a few feet away and waits, and after a moment Comet turns and takes a few steps his way. She's filled out nicely along the withers and ribs, looks healthy, no sign she's in any pain. Another six months and she'll be full-grown, five years old, a mare instead of a filly. He pats her shoulder as she drops her head, looking at him with both eyes, now, her ears tipped forward. The bulk of her amazes Dale, even after all these years. He's always surprised to see how big and powerful these animals are, all those layers of muscle underneath the tough, hairy hide, all the power behind every heavy clod of a foot against the ground. Comet's probably nearly 800 pounds, at this point. He'll measure her before he turns her back out, see where she's at, just to be sure. For all that weight, though, she's a gentle horse, maybe a little too gentle, a little too tame, for Dale's taste. Harold says there's no such thing as a too-tame horse.

"Come on, sweetheart," Dale says, rubbing the back of his fingers up the white strip on her nose. She ducks and nudges the bucket, and he lets her sniff it, get a taste, then he backs up a few steps and waits. She follows, and

soon he has her back in the stall, her head bent over the manger, her breath coming in snuffling gasps around her sloppy eating. He watches her eat for a moment, knows from the thick moist smell of her stall that he'll need to muck it out tomorrow, get some fresh straw down. He leaves the stall door open so she can amble out to the stock tank if she wants, then says his good-nights, hangs up the pitchfork that Harold abandoned, and walks back to the house.

The next afternoon, when the dinner dishes are drying in their rack, Hannah gets the pie down from the top shelf where she hid it from the men. Harold took the tractor down to the south pasture, working all day on turning hay in the windrows there, so she's free to take the truck. She sets the pie on the floorboard and drives slowly to keep it from sliding around too much. The crust turned out pretty good, she thinks, even though crusts aren't her specialty. Melissa is an indifferent baker at best, so most likely she won't notice.

The Wedel place seems to abut theirs on the map, but it feels like there's a larger border. Old Highway 40 marks the actual border, and forty yards in the railroad slices through August's southern field. Maybe this is where they're planning to put the missile, she thinks, looking over the dry land. The stalks from the harvested milo still stand in stiff rows; they should have been cut and baled a

week ago, at least. August always has been, according to Harold, a lazy farmer, but as Hannah turns a half-mile in to take the long sand road up to the homestead, she sees more than laziness: The place looks neglected, from the untrimmed trees bending too close to the water tank to the dry kitchen garden north of the house. She parks by August's truck, near the big gray barn, and as she steps out she's rushed by a mangy orange dog. He circles her, yelping and panting.

"You stay on down," she says, walking around the truck to get her pie. The dog follows, whining faintly when she shoos him away from the open truck door. She's not much one for domestic animals; they always seem one more thing to clean up after, one more thing to feed and worry over.

"Buck, you quit it," August calls. Hannah turns and sees him walking out of his implement shed, wiping his hands on a rag. He's a tall, thin, sand-haired man, wearing a red-billed Co-Op cap, not much changed since they were kids together. "Come on," August yells, slapping the side of his thigh, and the dog bounds over. August tosses a stick far into the field behind him and the dog races off, leaving them alone in the yard. Hannah closes the truck.

"He's half-blind," August says, walking up. He smells like grease, not the dust she's used to on a farmer; there's a smudge of it across his forehead. "Take him half a year to find that thing."

“Think his nose works all right,” Hannah says. “I take it he likes peach.”

“That what that is? I was afraid you were returning an empty dish.”

“That’d be bad luck,” she says, and August smiles.

“Well, bring it on in, then, if it’s for me.”

“I don’t need to bother you. I just thought I’d drop in on Melissa.”

August tugs the bill of his cap up so his dark eyes are visible. “She’s not home right now,” he says.

Hannah nods. She feels sweat trickle down the back of her neck, wants just to get into the house or back into the truck, somewhere out of this sun. “Run into town?”

“No,” he says, then shakes his head. “I was just about to take a break for something to drink, anyway. What’s say you bring that inside?”

“Sure.” So she follows him into the small house, where she’s been a hundred times before, and can’t help noticing the changes. There’s dust on the picture frames in the entryway, boot prints on the bright Linoleum floor that August laid for Melissa’s birthday a few years back. When they walk past the dark dining room, she sees the table covered with stacks of papers - schoolwork, it looks like, things Katherine is grading. At least with all the shades drawn the house is cooler, Hannah thinks as she follows August into the kitchen.

“Just anywhere around here,” he says, tapping the counter. Hannah sets the plate down and glances around. There are two bowls next to the sink, two cups at the table. The window over the sink is shut, the panes greasy, the curtains limp with the heat and the damp of the room. When August opens the fridge to get out the tea, a faint sweet smell of rotting vegetables escapes. She looks at the drawer, three down, that used to hold all of Melissa’s kitchen towels and dishrags. She wants to take a cloth in her hand and set this room to rights.

“Where’d you say Melissa is?” Hannah asks.

“We took her out to McPherson a couple weeks back,” he says.

Hannah nods. “Staying with her sister?”

“Off and on,” he says.

He takes two glasses down from a full cabinet and pours the tea clumsily from its jar, leaving a little pool of it on the counter. He offers her the tea, and she takes the glass in both hands. There’s a tiny speck of something, maybe a crust from a lemon, on one side of the glass. She brushes it off with her fingernail. “She’s been staying at the hospital some, too,” he says.

“That stomach issue again?”

“No. They call it kind of a nervous thing,” he says, looking mostly like he’s talking to his tea glass.

“Well,” Hannah says, and takes a sip of the tea.

“Well. August. I'm so sorry.”

He shrugs and shifts his weight, and Hannah is reminded of him as a boy. His people never had much money, despite their good land, but August was always turning up luck, always finding a quarter on the street to spend on his friends or, later, on Melissa. She looks down at her own tea, takes a small sip from the clean side of the glass.

“I didn't know things had gotten so bad,” she says. “I missed her in church the last couple of weeks.” Or had it been longer? When had she seen Melissa last - Mother's Day, maybe, when the whole family came to town. Melissa looked radiant in a white, store-bought dress, talking proudly of Katherine graduating from teacher's college, about their younger girl, Darla, in beauty school in Salina, seeing some nice man.

That was months ago, though. Too long. She looks over at August, and he shrugs, again.

“She's never been much for getting out,” he says.

“I guess I didn't realize how long it had been, until the meeting yesterday,” she says.

He nods, shifts the tea glass from one hand to the other. “The doctors said - and with things how they are -” he pauses. “I've been talking to some folks about selling the place.”

"I think I heard about that," she says, and he looks briefly surprised.

"Oh," he says, "no, not the Air Force guys. They're just gonna take a corner out, the northeast pasture, out by where your dad used to hay. No, I've been talking to some guys out of Salina. Looking to start a small cow-calf operation."

She hears Harold's voice in her own. "You have the land for that?"

"They've got more out past Newton," he says. "'Sides, it seems lately this place ain't so much use for farming."

She picks her glass up from the counter, wipes the ring it's left away with her hand. "If it's help you need, you know Harold -"

"No," August says, and laughs quietly. "I think I'm about done hitting my head against this old wall."

"What about Katherine?"

He shrugs. "I don't know she's got plans to stay much past the school year. Just came back as a favor, help out her mother and me." He sets his empty glass on the counter. "This sure looks good," he says, sliding the glass until it clinks against the edge of the glass pie plate. "Man might make a whole dinner from it."

"Save some for your girl," she says, and he nods. She moves around him to set her glass in the sink.

“They’re canned peaches,” she says. “So it might be a little sweet.”

“Well, I’ll eat it with coffee,” he says. “I appreciate it, Hannah. I’ll tell Melissa you came by. Might be she’s coming back, soon,” he says, and she hears the hope in his voice and the falseness behind it and nods.

He follows her out to the yard, where the dog is waiting, a stick in its mouth. August laughs and takes it, sits on the edge of the porch and rubs the dog’s head.

“You tell Harold hello,” he says, and she says she will.

“Take care now.” The truck starts and she drives around the house to get out, noting more - the weeds in the yard, the hay left to rot beside the shed - as she drives out. She’s at the highway again before she realizes she’s forgotten to put the window down, and when she does the blast of warm air hits her sweaty skin and she shivers, even though her hands stay sturdy on the wheel.

Saturday night they drive to Frank and Evelyn's place to watch Lawrence Welk. Evelyn greets them at the door, plump and kitchen-sweaty like always, and the warm smell of roasting meat rolls around her to meet them. She and Frank have been married ten years, now, since a year after his first wife, Karen, left. Karen was a quiet girl, slight, not made for the outdoors, not someone Harold ever got to know too well. Evelyn, well, she's fit in like she's always been here, bossing Harold's brother around. She reminds Harold a bit of a schoolteacher he once had.

"Well, if your brother isn't driving me crazy," Evelyn says, clapping Harold on the shoulder, and he laughs and takes off his hat. This is how she always is, talkative from the minute they pull up. "I swear I don't know what we're going to do. You know what he has in mind for Christmas? Wants to go to *Denver*. In the middle of winter."

Harold nods and hangs his hat on the rack nailed to the wall. Hannah scoots in beside him, hangs her coat on the rack by the door and takes his over, too. Evelyn looks around them to Dale and says, "I think Zachary's in his room," and Dale nods and heads up the stairs with his coat still on.

"Denver, huh?" Harold asks, rubbing his hands together. "Going out to see Uncle Joey?"

“I don’t know what put it in his head,” she says, shaking her head. There’s a smear of flour across her cheek and a towel with bright yellow stains slung over her shoulder. She’s a woman who always seems busy, even when she’s doing nothing, as Hannah likes to say. “But I’ll be darned if I’m going to load the boys up and all of our things just to drive eight hours in snow. No thank you.” She pulls the towel from her shoulder and wrings it between her hands, then points at the living room. “You talk some sense into him. I’ve always said you have too much, he’s got too little.”

“Well, we got a couple months to work on him,” Harold says, and Evelyn sighs.

“Can I help you with something, Ev?” Hannah asks, and they turn immediately to the kitchen, the swinging door squeaking on his hinges.

Harold walks through the foyer and into the living room. It’s surprisingly cool and loud, a window air conditioner humming across the way and the radio blaring from the kitchen. Evelyn’s two boys, Joey and Caleb, are crouched around a pile of wooden blocks in the middle of the room, building what could be a castle. Harold can’t see his brother, but he smells his sharp aftershave and sees his drink, a highball, sweating on a coaster on the dark end table next to the new sofa. Everything in the house still seems new, the upholstery bright under plastic covers, the

carpet thick and unworn, the furniture sturdy enough to hold a man when he drops from six feet, the glasses shiny and thin and innumerable. Everything is in matched sets — the wood frames they bought in the store, the chair and sofa and love seat, the good china in the glass-door cabinet at the end of their long dining room, even the two young boys in their dark denim overalls. Frank has done well for himself. He leads a comfortable life, a life a man could sure get used to, Harold thinks, settling himself in the arm chair that faces the fireplace.

“So what’s this we’re building?” he says, leaning forward, one elbow on his knee. “You boys putting up a barn?”

“It’s a castle,” the little one, Caleb, says, nodding his head. “Like the knights have.”

“That so?” Harold picks up a block and studies it. They’re store-bought, brightly painted shapes: This one is an orange rectangle with a half-moon cut out of one long side. “What’d you use this one for?” he asks.

Caleb takes the piece and looks it over gravely. “I think this will make a buttress,” he says.

Harold laughs. He hears his brother’s steps from down the hall and looks up. “Well, sounds like you’ve got it all planned.”

“Oh, they’ve got everything planned,” Frank says, dropping one hand on top of Caleb’s head. “Just about the

whole world, to hear them tell it some days. How you doing, Harold?"

"Well just fine," Harold says, settling back into his chair. "I'm getting along. How about you? How's the town treating you?"

"Oh, same as usual," he says. He picks his drink up from the table and says, "Can I fix you something?"

They keep no alcohol in their house, but Frank came back from college with a taste for the stuff, and Harold doesn't mind a drink now and then. "I'd take a beer," he says, and Frank nods.

"I think we can find one of those." He stirs his drink once with a glass stick, then sets it on the table again and walks through the swinging kitchen door. Harold glances at the boys, finds the older one, Joey, looking at Harold's boots. He glances down himself, to see what might be interesting; he's sure he scraped the mud off before he got in the car. "You got a pair of these, son?" he asks, and Joey nods. "What kind?"

"They're brown," Joey says. "Do you want to see them?"

"Oh, maybe after a bit," Harold says. "Are they good, you like them?" Joey nods. "That's good, then. That's all I need to know. Man's gotta like his boots, his hat, and his gun. You don't spare any expense on that, you'll always be a happy man."

Joey looks up at him and nods again, his face perfectly serious. He has a look like Harold's father; in fact, he, more than Caleb or Zachary, more than Harold's own boy, seems to take after their side of the family, with his dark hair and eyes and his naturally relaxed, almost frowning, expression. "Dad said we might be able to come out and hunt with you sometime," he says, and Harold nods.

Frank walks back in carrying an open bottle of High Life, and he dries it on a towel from the bar before he hands it off. "You gonna bring these young men out to hunt on my place sometime?" Harold asks, looking up at Frank. "Me and Joey just been having a talk about it. He says he's got the boots for it."

"And the gun, pretty soon, depending on what Christmas brings," Frank says, smiling. He takes a seat on the couch. "We'll have to see about that, but I'd guess it can be arranged. Still got those quail out by the mulberry bushes?"

"Shit, more every year," Harold says. "I've been letting the Zerger boy come over and take a few now and then. Can't keep 'em hunted down myself."

Frank nods. "I can still remember Pop taking us out there."

Harold laughs. "Yeah, you weren't much taller than these guys," he says. He laughs again, shakes his head, and Frank sighs. It's an old story, but Harold doesn't get

tired of it. Joey's watching him, still, so he says, "Your dad was a pretty mean shot."

"With a pellet gun," Frank says. "Your uncle and your grandpa sent me out after birds with a damn pellet gun. I was nearly nine before I knew the difference. Hell if you haven't been laughing about that one for thirty years."

Joey smiles up at Harold. "He thought it was a real gun?" Harold nods, unable to wipe the smile off his face. Frank was such a serious hunter, too, when he was a kid. "I've had a BB gun since I was real little."

"Well, and now you're gonna get a good gun, sounds like," Harold says. "Probably about time. I think we got Dale his first, a 20 gauge, when he was about your age. What are you, now, 10?"

"Eleven in May," Joey says.

"I'm *seven*," Caleb announces, as though it's been in dispute. He stacks a new piece on top of his castle. There are even little windows in the side.

Hannah opens the kitchen door and says, "Where'd Dale get to, I want to ask him about Laverne's girl."

"I don't know, but that dinner smells pretty good," Harold says.

"I bet you leave that door open, he'll show up shortly," Frank says. "Though you might check the back yard, I think maybe Zachary is out there." Hannah nods and Harold watches her walk down the hall, her steps sturdy and

slow, never urgent like Evelyn's. He hears the bang of the back door as it closes behind her and shakes his head, wonders what exactly she's hoping to find out from the boy. Not like he's going to talk about it, unless it's got something to do with his car or maybe his games at school. He sits back and rests a hand on the convenient bulge of his stomach.

"I tell you," Frank says after a heavy sigh, "Evelyn doesn't cook like this unless you all are here. You probably think we're eating roasts every day."

"I think you're probably not starving," Harold admits. "How's business, anyway?"

"Oh, you know, people get sick, people get better," Frank says. "Half the time it doesn't seem to have much to do with me. These folks they mostly want someone to tell them it's gonna be all right, someone to listen to them bellyache."

"Hell, send 'em over," Harold says. "I'll sit and listen all day, they pay me the same as you."

Frank smiles and shakes his head. "I think you and I try to switch jobs for a week there'll be a lot of people unhappy. Most of all you, when you come back and find your fields gone to hell."

Harold takes a sip of his beer and nods his agreement. There was a time when Frank looked like he'd be a good farmer — used to always be underfoot when Harold and his

dad were working in the fields, always wanted to run the tractor or the thresher. He raised prize-winning hogs all through high school, too, one of them so fine and fat and pink that their father had paid to have its picture taken with its purple Grand Prize ribbon before they butchered it. But the farm had come to Harold, and Frank had gone away to college at Wichita State and found a taste for the sciences. Now his house is twice as large as the old farmhouse that raised them both, and Harold's getting ready to put his own son through that same college.

"So what else is new?" Frank asks. He leans back on the couch, raises the faint squawk of rubbing plastic.

"Missed you at the church meeting this week," Harold says, and Frank nods.

"How was it?"

"They say they're going to put a missile in down the road, out on Wedel's place."

Frank leans forward. "Well," he says, setting his drink down on the coffee table, "I can't say as that's a surprising place. Close to the railroad. And I imagine he needs the money."

"Sounds like he's turning the whole place over," Harold says. "Or like he might. I plan to have a word with him after church Sunday." He takes another sip of his beer, appreciates its coldness, the way it seems to spread

the comfort of the room inside of him. "I thought you might come with me."

"Me?" Frank says. "You need moral support or something?"

"No, I thought you might make him an offer on his land," Harold says, and Frank sits back fast.

"What would I do with the Wedel place?" he asks.

"Lease it to me," Harold says. "I imagine you have the funds for it. And I could do with the extra land. I'd pay you back fairly, of course, and you'd have a place to keep a horse or two for your boys." He tips his head toward them, aware that Joey is listening intently. "Boys ought to have a place to run around."

Frank looks genuinely surprised. "What are you going to do with more land?"

"Same thing I'm doing with what I've got, I imagine," Harold says. "Only twice as much. And he's got some damn decent fields for alfalfa, the way the river runs through."

"Runs through and up and over, these last few years," Frank says. His eyes are narrowed, and he looks a bit like their mother, shrewd, cautious, but somehow hopeful. Harold grins and takes another sip of his beer. "So let me get this straight," Frank says. "You want to take on another farm, this one with flooding problems, this one where they're about to put in some missile."

“Well,” Harold admits, leaning back in his seat, “I have to say, I think they might have to rethink that plan if I was running the place. Just think it might not be so easy and comfortable for them.”

Frank laughs. “You want me to buy an entire farm just so you can stick it to the military?”

“What they’re doing is wrong,” Harold says. He sets his beer down on the end table with a hard thunk. “They want so badly to plant missiles, they ought to put them on their bases, not out here, not where a man makes his living by the land. And not out here where we don’t want any part of their war, anyway.”

Frank isn’t looking at him; he’s looking down at the boys. Caleb is still playing with the blocks, but Joey’s given up all pretense. He’s just watching them, his eyes wide and expectant, and Harold thinks that’s just fine. That’s exactly what Frank needs to look at here, his kids, his future. That’s what’s in the balance.

The back door bangs again, and then Hannah’s standing at the edge of the room, her arms crossed. Harold scowls across at her. “You find him?” he asks.

“Sure,” she says, nodding. “What’s got you so riled up?”

“Oh, Harold thinks I should buy myself a farm,” Frank says.

Hannah nods. "Boys should have a place to run," she says, and Harold grins and shakes his head.

"There you go," he says, taking up his beer again. He ignores his wife's sharp look as he takes a sip. "Voice of reason, like always. Why I married her."

"Never have figured out why she married you," Frank says, and he winks across at Hannah.

"Oh, for the money," she says, and the men laugh. She looks down at Joey, sees he's smiling shyly under the fringe of hair that Evelyn really ought to cut. "Say, we've got some dough leftover in the kitchen, you boys want to help us make something out of it?" she asks. She can read the signals well enough, that Harold and Frank need a little time away from younger ears, that Harold's pushing Frank's buttons in the way that he always manages to do. Hannah's sure that one of these days, Harold's going to get them uninvited to this house.

"I do," Caleb volunteers, but Joey stays silent. Of course, she thinks, he's too old to want to stay with the women in the kitchen, but too young to be with the boys in the backyard. Well, nothing much to do about that.

"Why don't you both go for a bit," Frank says, and Hannah looks over at him, grateful. "I bet your mother would appreciate your good help."

Caleb's already on his feet, but Joey is taking his time, packing the blocks back into their tin-bottomed

canister. As he stalls, Frank says, "Now, Hannah, what do you think about this whole missile mess?"

"I agree with the pastor," she says. "I don't think there's any need for us to have a missile out here. No need for them to shoot at us unless they think we're gonna shoot back."

Joey looks up from his blocks. "We shoot at birds even though they don't shoot back."

"Boy, I hope that doesn't ever change," Harold says, and Frank laughs but Hannah keeps looking at the boy.

"That's hunting," she says. "What we're talking about, it's one man shooting at another. And that's a wrong thing. You understand that?" He nods. "They teach you about that in Sunday school?"

"Yes," he says, nodding. "But they've never said much about missiles."

"Well, soon they probably will," Hannah says, and she looks across at Harold, pleased to see he's listening. Joey stands up with the bin of blocks in his arms.

"I tell you," Frank says, "I was sort of hoping to stay out of this altogether."

Hannah shakes her head, but Harold beats her to speaking. "I imagine there's not much chance of that," he says. "Unless you're planning just not to go to church for a while."

Frank sighs. "We'll be there Sunday. Pastor's pretty fired up, huh?"

"About on par with your brother, there," Hannah says. She drops her hand onto Joey's shoulder. "What's say we get some food ready, OK?"

They walk into the kitchen, and when the door closes, Harold turns expectantly to his brother. Frank sighs again and carries his glass back to the small cabinet he uses as a bar. "You're serious."

"I usually am."

He shakes his head. Harold sips his beer and watches Frank pouring himself a second drink, watches Frank turn and not quite look at him. The thin line across his forehead is the only thing that gives away the thoughts spinning in his head; otherwise, Harold might think he's being ignored.

"After church," Frank says, and Harold nods, mildly, comfortable now in his victory. No need to gloat. No need to risk it. "We're just gonna talk."

"That's about all I can do," Harold says. He holds his bottle up as Frank walks by, and Frank shakes his head again and clinks the glass. "That and pray, I guess."

"Oh sure," Frank says, settling back in on the couch. "I suppose there's always that."

They're called soon after for dinner, a good Sunday meal of pork chops in thick brown gravy, potatoes mashed with cream, cooked carrots, and a salad that Evelyn tossed

together and Harold studiously avoids. Cucumber salad, sure, potato salad, fine, but this pile of slick greens from the grocery store - no thank you. He likes his food easy to cut, easy to chew, easy to recognize.

"May I eat in my room?" Zachary asks, plate in one hand, book under his arm. "I have this physics exam, and -"

"Go ahead," Frank says with a wave of his hand, and Zachary disappears. Hannah sometimes wonders if Frank is so quick to excuse Zachary's little quirks - he almost never eats with them, rarely comes to visit with the rest of the family - because his mother was such a strange one. She wonders how Evelyn deals with the boy.

Hannah has Dale take a little of the salad even though the boy's clearly old enough to decide for himself what he wants to eat and what he doesn't. "Well, so, Dale," Frank says, "how's that football team looking this year?"

"Not bad," he says. "You know Kenny Macaty?" Frank nods, and so does Harold.

"John's boy."

"Sure," Dale says. "He got his knee twisted something good at practice, so we're down to fourteen guys."

Frank sips his drink. "Hmm. He'll be OK in a week, he keeps ice on it."

Dale looks at Frank. He forgets, sometimes, that his uncle has his fingers quite literally on the pulse of the whole town. "You think so?" he asks.

"Unless he gets stupid and overworks it, sure, he'll be fine. It's a minor sprain," Franks says.

"He's on the bench 'til Coach gives the all-clear," Dale says.

Harold, around a mouthful of pork, says, "And his daddy's got a guy does most of their fence work for them, now. Least he won't slow them up there."

This, of course, is where his father's mind goes, Dale thinks, looking down at his plate, pushing carrots into the potatoes. He hasn't been to a game, yet, probably won't ever go; he sees football as a distraction, an allowance, and he's talked before about how Dale had better not "get himself hurt" out there. The thing is, though, Harold's pretty much handling the farm on his own these days, anyway. Dale does chores and watches out for his horse, but Harold handles the planting and the disking and the tending and the tilling. Harold feeds the cattle and keeps the fences up and the windmill spinning and the world turning, if you ask Harold.

Which Dale won't. He's learned in his ag classes about different methods of farming - modern methods, ways of getting a higher yield from every acre, ways of encouraging cattle to grow heartier, stay healthier. Ways of getting

them out of the harvest-to-harvest cycle of living they're in, where every winter his mother goes to town to work at the store because the farm can't support them. The farm, at current, can't even feed them all.

He takes a bite of his aunt's store-bought salad, tells her it's good, and ducks to eating again. Across the table, Evelyn is telling his mother about a new recipe she has for hamburger patties.

"You put that sauce right into the meat, so when you grill it, they have it right inside. Makes 'em real juicy."

Hannah blinks, her fork hovering over the impossibly smooth potatoes. "Where would you find a recipe for hamburgers?"

"It's in the women's auxiliary magazine, from the hospital," Evelyn says. She smiles at Hannah and passes the gravy boat to Caleb without hardly looking at him, quintessential Evelyn, able to go three directions at once.

"Mm," Hannah says. She's heard enough about the Women's Auxiliary for one day. Evelyn was on about it the whole time they were in the kitchen, that she's had a recipe or a story printed in there - no, she said, "published," like it was any kind of big deal for the doctor's wife to get whatever she wanted put in the hospital newspaper. Hannah never went to college, not like Evelyn, and she never graduated like Frankie, that's for sure, but some things she

knows just fine. She knows Maryann Anderson, the woman who heads the auxiliary, from church. She's always trying to get people to help out - to make little gunny-sack teddy bears for any kids who came through the hospital, or to donate money to put a real live Christmas tree in the lobby to make the place nice. As far as Hannah is concerned, a hospital is a place you go when you're born or giving birth or dying, and you spend the rest of your time trying to stay as far away as possible. If she ever has to go there again, she'll be glad to have someone like Frankie in charge of things, but she doesn't think any of Maryann's decorations or Evelyn's recipes are going to make things better.

"You all ought to come over and have some of those burgers sometimes," Frankie says, now, looking at her, not Harold. Smart boy, Frankie; he has to know what Harold thinks of frivolous trips into town. "You let us know, sometime, you come in to town for groceries or something and we'll have a little cookout. Maybe go to a game on a Friday or something, see how well Macaty's leg heals up after all. What say?"

Hannah sees Dale's head raise from his plate of food, and wonders how the boy doesn't know what's coming. Harold doesn't truck with football games, whether his son is playing or not, whether it means his wife will be embarrassed in church Sunday when everyone's talking about the game or not.

“Now, where’m I gonna find the time for that?” Harold asks.

Frank stands his ground; Hannah can see their father in both of them, the stubborn curl of their bottom lips.

“Here you are telling me you want to take on another farm and you don’t have two hours to get a hamburger and watch your son play some darn fine football?”

Dale’s looking up, still, his fork frozen over his plate. Hannah looks around and accidentally catches Evelyn’s eye; she’s giving a look like, *oh, these men*, that Hannah wants no part of. She’s not allied with anyone against her husband. This should be a family discussion.

“Well, let’s just see how the week goes,” she says, and Harold looks over at her approvingly, then ducks to his plate again.

“I like a good hamburger,” Caleb says, voice deeply serious, and Hannah stifles a smile; Evelyn laughs aloud.

“Well, lucky for you, we try and always have a little hamburger on hand,” Evelyn says, modestly, knowing, perhaps, that this is all that Hannah ever reliably has on hand. When the freezer empties of it, they go to the chickens.

“Our mother used to make a good hamburger casserole,” Frank says, surprising Harold. Frankie wasn’t much older than Caleb when their mother died; Harold had wondered if he’d had any memories of her.

“Sure,” Harold says. “With onions. Always lots of onions. Onion in everything.” He glances over at Evelyn. “That’s what’s good in this gravy, Ev. Got enough to put a burn in a man’s belly.”

“Well, I think I’ll take that as a compliment,” she says. “It’s just the easiest thing. You take the drippings and you mix them up with a soup packet. You know what I mean?” she asks, turning to Hannah. “The little Lipton kind, they have in the store.”

“Sure,” Hannah says, though she’s never purchased one herself before. In fact, when they’ve slid across her checkout counter, she’s looked down on them, a little, thinking how sad and desolate a meal must be with packaged soup.

“They aren’t worth anything for soup. No, I wouldn’t ever use them that way. But mix them with your gravies, or sprinkled on a meatloaf --”

“She does make a good meatloaf,” Frank says, smiling, and Hannah has to smile back.

“Well, maybe you can write up that recipe for me,” she says.

“I’d be delighted.”

They have at best an uneasy truce. Not at all the kind of closeness that Hannah has noted amongst the pairs of sisters who attend their church. And perhaps that’s her own fault - she was raised with boys, married a boy, and has a

boy. Her whole life is constructed around men, their patterns of speech, their ways of seeing, their wants and needs. Men are definite. Predictable. Harold likes things the way he likes them, and that's all she's ever had to worry about. What he likes has served just fine for what she likes, too. There's rarely enough time in the day to worry beyond making sure everything's satisfactory in the house.

Evelyn is such a presence in her own home - not just in her kitchen, but in the small feminine touches around the house - that Hannah doesn't know what to make of her. Doilies everywhere. Delicate objects left sitting on end tables, just for show, not *for* anything. It's not the kind of household she grew up in, not the kind of house she runs. It makes her uneasy, as does most of Evelyn's attention. It seems like the same time that's devoted to those idle decorations could have been better spent somewhere - mending, ironing, cooking, getting things set aside for winter. But maybe it's more than that, some offense she's taking from the displays of wealth, the way that Frank and his wife can spend their money on such trivial little things. Who do they decorate the place up for, if not for company like Hannah and Harold? Isn't it meant to show off, meant to show *pride*, that contemptible sin, that hungry vanity? Is this really the way a Christian woman's home should look?

She says none of this to her sister-in-law, of course, because she knows nothing about town life. That's how she says it to Harold on the way home, "Town life," just like that, with a firm shake of her head. Harold agrees, just as dismissive. It is a mystery to them both why anyone would want to live as Frank and Evelyn do, in a house full of breakable dandies, removed from the land, removed even from the major efforts of a good day, and therefore removed completely from its rewards.

CHAPTER III

FRANK AND EVELYN

Frank's mornings start at the hospital. Sure, before that there's breakfast at home, coffee Evelyn makes in the new automatic drip pot, the local paper, but Frank doesn't turn on his brain, not really, until he pulls his car into the reserved space at the back of the hospital.

The Guilford County Memorial Hospital is fourteen miles from Frank's house, almost exactly, situated neatly on the outskirts of the county seat, Guilford. Frank lives in Midland because it's where he went to school, where he grew up, where he wants his kids to grow up, and it's where his clinic is, but the center of his professional world is this red-brick, four-story hospital built on a hill overlooking the juncture of the state highway and the Saline River. It's been around for fifty years, first as a two-story clinic and hospital, then, in the forties, built up to include two more floors, including a top-floor maternity wing for the expanding population. Ten years ago, just as Frank was getting to town, they added the radiology department, so they can do their own X-rays, and made the cramped lab a little bigger. There's a single-room Emergency Department; too; where they usually see men with

fishing or farming accidents or kids banged up in highway races.

He walks through the lab instead of through the front doors, not because he's hiding but because this is where he gets the real news of the day, from Tim Parker, their lab director, who was probably in the lab the day that Frank was born in the maternity ward.

Today he says there are new results waiting on one of Frank's patients, Mrs. Mueller, whose white counts are still above what they should be. "Guess that settles it, huh?" he says, and Parker nods, turns back to his enormous microscope, his hands ageless under rubber gloves, not the slightest tremble as he holds a glass slide.

He tucks those results into his briefcase and then steps into the hallway, where the smell changes from alcohol and blood to the warm mush of the nearby cafeteria. A chalkboard sign says lunch today will be fried chicken, and Frank shakes his head, wishes he hadn't scheduled such a tight day for himself. The ladies back there fry a mean chicken.

He stops in to see them and to get a cup of coffee, then he walks to the doctor's lounge, just past radiology. The tile here is the same checkered blue and white as the hall but the room feels cozier, a function of the green-glassed banker's lights that Doc Greer favors. Frank pulls the chain on the one at the desk, then sits and reviews Mrs.

Mueller's paperwork again. The family will be in that evening, most likely; her husband and the two girls usually come by after he finishes work at the elevator. He'll talk to them then all together. He tucks the paper into the bottom of his briefcase, takes a few other charts out and slides them into an outbox on the desk, signaling they've been signed.

Mornings here are for paperwork, administrative tasks, catching up on dictation and the forms necessary for billing, making sure no one's had any big overnight changes. He doesn't see patients in the early morning if he can help it, something he picked up from Doc Greer. Greer makes his rounds just before dinnertime, when patients are most likely to have their family members around and to be most upbeat, to remember their questions. Plenty of doctors favor early morning rounds, but Frank thinks Greer is right about this.

After an hour at the hospital, when the coffee cup is empty, he hands it off to a reception girl and walks to his car, then drives three blocks to his clinic. They start seeing patients right at nine, so he has only a few moments to put down the case and send a girl for coffee before the real work starts. The complaints this morning are average - headaches, backaches, stomachaches. By noon, he's seen ten people, written an equal number of prescriptions, and repeated his prediction for the high school football game six times. Not a bad morning at all. Half the town seems

hell-bent on getting the cold that's traveling around, but other than that, there's not much that's exciting.

He has an hour scheduled to meet with Doc Greer that afternoon, and before the meeting he takes a moment to clean up in his little lavatory. Greer has been practicing in Midland and the surrounding county since well before Frank was born. Frank is the first doctor he's ever agreed to share an office with, and that happened only two years ago. He's nearly seventy now, and every time he calls a meeting, Frank wonders if this might be the time when he's decided to retire. Frank enjoys the old man's company, but he's also ready to take over the practice completely. They both know this.

Today, though, the old man just wants to talk. He offers Frank a drink, which he accepts. As the scotch splashes against the side of the glass, Greer says, "I still remember the days you'd only drink Coca Cola."

"You don't forget anything, do you?" They have this talk nearly every time they meet. Greer keeps a few bottles in the fridge anyway, and Frank knows when they part he'll offer him a few to take back to his boys. "There's still not much better on a hot day."

"Hm." Greer hands Frank his drink, then settles behind his desk with a glass that's twice as dark, no hint of ice or soda. "Well, what do you think about this

military mess?" he asks. "Seems like nobody can talk about anything but that all day today."

Frank nods. He's found the same thing. News travels fast through the county, and their office, with its cramped waiting room and two friendly doctors, acts like a clearinghouse. "Oh, I don't know quite what to think, yet," Frank says. "My brother's pretty worked up about it."

"I imagine," Greer says, and laughs. "You get his blood pressure down yet?"

"Hell, he doesn't talk to me about that," Frank says. Harold has never sought, and as far as Frank can tell, wouldn't necessarily trust his advice on medical matters. "He's not convinced it's all a done deal."

"Well, I imagine he's wrong, there," Greer says. "I had a captain from down Wichita way in my office yesterday, wanted to know if maybe his men who're working out at the site could come through here for physicals."

Frank sits up. "How's that? They don't have their own doctors at the base?"

"I imagine they do," he said. "But he was thinking more about the highway crew, I guess, and some of the supporting staff. Sounds like they might fill the whole town up, hotels and diners and all, this winter."

Frank frowns and sets the Coke on the desk. If the military is already this far along in their planning, well,

he thinks Greer may be right. It may be too late to turn things back, despite all of Harold's will and stubbornness.

"So what'd you tell them?"

"What could I tell them? I said we see sick people, it's our job. Man shows up in my hospital, I take care of him whether he's wearing a uniform or not."

Frank shakes his head. "That's one thing. But you get a few guys in uniforms sitting in the waiting room - that's gonna be another. People won't like that."

Greer snorts. "They don't much like taking their medicine, either, but I reckon they'll live with it. What's the other choice? Drive an hour to see that quack in Russell? Huh. Doubt that's gonna be an option." Greer keeps staring forward, but Frank feels stung. He took his first wife, Karen, to a doctor in Russell. Not the quack Greer is mentioning, but - well, to Greer, all out-of-town doctors are pretty much quacks, men who don't understand the necessary balance of knowing the patient and her illness. Frank reminds himself that this is how he feels now, too, that this is the change he's made since Karen left.

"Well, I guess you're right," Frank says, picking up his Coke again. "Maybe they could park behind the clinic, though. Save me some trouble with my pastor."

Greer laughs. "Only one power can keep you out of trouble there," he says, grinning. "Say, how's Evelyn? Margot sure liked those apple fritters."

“She’s good, she’s good,” Frank says. “The boys keep her pretty busy. How’s Margot?”

They slide easily into small talk and town gossip. There’s no one else in town to really jaw about patients with, not in this way. Greer understands why it’s funny that old man Blackmun’s got endless heartburn, whereas anyone else who heard the story might find it more sad than funny, and he’s got new information on the suspicious “horse kick” injury that Jerry West got last month - sounds like it was the wife after all. The gossip fills a gap for Frank that’s been there since medical school, a gap for conversation that relies as much on medical knowledge as personal acquaintances.

The truth is, beyond the occasional admiring glance at his diploma on his office wall, no one cares what he learned in school. No one here really cares if he went to school at all, so long as he can tell them how to take down the swelling on a bee sting or judge accurately when Grandma’s cough deserves a hospital stay. His lab orders and notes to the nurses are all in plain language, have been since the day the head nurse pulled him aside at the hospital and told him that his fancy language was slowing them all down, and if he could manage to just say what he means they’d all appreciate it. He still reviews his textbooks, stays up with the Journal of the American Medical Association when it comes through and keeps them stacked prominently on his

desk, but it's not the same. Not the same as sleepless nights spent in the study lounge with four other guys, cramming for the big organic chemistry exam or laughing about their bow-tied A&P professor, cracking jokes about physics problems that no one else in this town, Greer included, would understand.

Frank thanks Greer for the Coke when the old man slides back in his chair, clearly dismissing him. He goes to his own office and turns the banker's light out over the paperwork stacked there. He'll do his rounds, then go home. He can make a drink, and there will be supper soon enough, and the boys, and all the trappings that being the smartest guy in town can buy. Another hour, and he'll just go home.

Evelyn closes the oven and settles back at the table. She's checked the casserole five times, and it still doesn't have that perfect brown potato crust. She lights a cigarette and exhales into the pleasant quiet of her kitchen. The boys are outside, playing in the sandbox Zachary built them last Christmas; Zachary's still at school, doing who knew what, probably reading a math book for fun. Evelyn tries, Lord, she tries to love that boy like he's her own, but he's a different creature completely from her own boys. Zachary's quiet, aloof, shy, and - if she's being uncharitable - afraid of his own shadow. Seventeen and he's never had a girlfriend, so far as she can

tell. She's tried to ask him about it, see if he has questions, because she's the closest thing the boy has to a mother, but he's simply turned beet-red at her every suggestion of conversation.

Which reminds her. She leaves the cigarette in its ashtray and hustles to the refrigerator. Yes. Beet salad in the back, marinated nicely in vinegar and sugar just like the cookbook said. That should do fine for salad tonight, with some carrots chopped into it. None for the boys, though; they'll get the red stain everywhere. No, this is a grown up salad. She'll cook carrots for the boys.

She prepares this and starts to relax. The quiet house bothers her. She tries to plan better than this. Usually there's a meeting to be attended in the afternoons, a quilt guild or the Hospital Auxiliary planning board, sometimes just a coffee in the church basement. She bakes for everything. Frank isn't as rich as most of the women seem to think he is - and she's seen their stares, understands them for exactly what they are, envy and desire - but they do fine, and she can certainly afford baking supplies. In fact, she can afford the boxed mixes they sell in the store, and that's what she uses.

She has friends. Plenty of friends. Ladies all over town stop to talk with her in the street, and the chairs next to her are never empty at the church socials. They have other couples over on occasion, too, for little dinner

parties, and even the pastor and his wife at least once a month. People enjoy their home, their hospitality. Evelyn knows she's a good hostess.

There's a faint familiar rumble outside, and she looks sees Frank's car through the kitchen window. He's home early, but not terribly so. There was a meeting with Dr. Greer today. He'll probably be in a thoughtful mood. That's usually how this goes.

When he walks inside, she's stirring the carrots, even though they don't really need her attention. "Smells good," he says, stopping to peer over her shoulder.

"These are for the boys," she says. "I can make more if you'd like."

He shrugs. "I'm happy with whatever you make." He hangs his hat in the hallway and walks to the sideboard. There's ice in the bucket, and he takes a few pieces out with his tongs. Evelyn might not understand what he's talking about when it comes to medicine, but she's a sharp woman. She remembers just about everything. Between her and Doc Greer, there's probably an impressive history of this town to be had.

"You want a drink, Ev?"

"Oh, not just yet," she says, always her answer. Sometimes, after the boys are in bed, she'll take a glass of wine, but not too regularly. She says it makes her sleepy, though Frank's observation has always been the opposite.

“Did you have an all right meeting?” she asks. Her voice sounds appropriately bright in her own ears, perfectly interested.

“Fine enough,” he says. He stands in the kitchen doorway, mixing his drink. His tie is already loosened. “Doc says the military men were over to talk with him about maybe sending some guys through to the clinic now and then.”

“Is that right?” Evelyn clucks. “Well, I suppose everyone needs good care.”

“Yes,” he says. His voice is grave. “I said I hoped they might park behind the clinic, scare everyone a little less.”

Evelyn gives a smart shake of her head and snaps off the burner at the same time. The carrots can sit for a while; they’ll be perfectly soft and sweet by the time the boys get washed up. “I imagine people will be smart enough to spot their car wherever it’s parked,” she says, and Frank feels the brief whip of her disapproval.

“Yes, probably true,” he says. “Still, no point in creating more trouble.”

“Uh-huh. Say, what was Harold on about the other day, with the Wedel place?”

“Oh,” Frank says, and shrugs. “He wants me to buy them out, lease him the land.”

Evelyn doesn't deal with the money side of things, other than keeping a neat checkbook, but it surprises her a bit that this is within their means. There's Zachary's college to worry about, after all. But Frank is smart about these things. She picks up a towel to wipe down the counter as they talk. "Are you thinking about it?" He shrugs again. That means yes. "Well. Harold would probably do real well with that place."

"I suppose so," Frank says. "He seems to think if we could get that land, we could stop the military going in there."

Evelyn looks over. She thinks of the women at church, their chilled glances this Sunday when she'd apologized for missing the big meeting. "Do you think that's true?" she asked.

"I don't know there's much that can be done at this point."

"But still," Evelyn says, turning from the counter, her hands caught up in a dishtowel, "surely, we should try. Even if things didn't work out."

"That's a terrible reason to buy a piece of land," he says gently, and watches her face fall. She turns back to sweeping bits of carrot off the counter into the sink.

"Ev," he says, and steps forward, puts his hand on her shoulders. "I'll think about it."

She nods. "I just think, well, we've been so blessed, Frank."

He pulls back. He doesn't like to hear this kind of talk. His parents were deeply religious, observant Mennonites, and his brother has picked up the language, if not always the behavior. He sometimes forgets that his wife is quietly but firmly a product of this same church, that it's one of the reasons she was happy to move here, to know there would be a community she could join.

"I'm going to read a bit before dinner," he says.
"How long?"

It's probably ready now, but she knows without even looking at him that he needs his time away. He needs a moment before the boys flood in, before the house is filled again with the noises of family life. It is always like this after work.

"Fifteen minutes?" she says, her voice back to the same cheer and enthusiasm as it was earlier. He nods and ducks out without a word, and Evelyn allows herself no pause in dinner preparations. The potatoes have a crust, now, so she turns the oven down to low, then turns to the table. Her abandoned cigarette has burnt to ash, so she lights another.

A new farm. Well. That would give the boys a place to run, maybe give her a place for a garden. She could grow

vegetables, hand out extra tomatoes at church. Talk to the women about the Army trying to take their land.

“Boys!” she calls out the window. “It’s nearly time to wash up.” Caleb waves, and Jacob nods absently. She knows the way it is with them, too. It will take a little time to disengage, to get inside, and while she waits, she can make pudding. She sets the cigarette down and gets to work.

There’s a knock on Hannah’s kitchen door at midday on Wednesday, and she dries her hands and answers. Frank is standing on the step, his head tilted, a nervous, boyish smile on his face. “Hello,” he says.

“Well, come on in.” Hannah hands him the door and walks back to the sink, where the soapy water hides submerged breakfast dishes. She went out to help Harold with a stubborn cow that morning and hadn’t gotten things washed up, and now she hopes Frank doesn’t notice. She may not keep a house pretty like Evelyn does, but she’s always kept a clean kitchen.

“I hope I’m not bothering you,” Frank says, still standing by the doorway. It’s strange that he’s just lurking, and he seems to understand it at the same time she does. This was, after all, his mother’s kitchen long before it was hers; it was here, in fact, that she first met Frank, when Harold brought her to dinner for the first time. She

was sixteen, Harold eighteen, Frankie just fourteen when they married two years later.

This is still how Frank sees her, in fact, as the middle step between him and his often over-bearing brother. Harold was a difficult boy to grow up with, demanding as much from others as he ever did himself. It surprised Frank when he brought home Hannah, who was the first person other than their father that Frank ever heard say a word in opposition to Harold's opinion.

But their relationship has become different, over the years. Not strained, not exactly, but - different. More distant. The sensible traits that made Hannah a perfect partner for Frank's hothead brother also made her an unlikely ally for any of the women in town, and Frank now often saw Hannah through Evelyn's eyes - as a lonely, isolated woman doing what she knew best as best she could.

And if he pities her, he sometimes, like now, has the impression that she is embarrassed for her own situation, embarrassed that the bright young woman she was when they first met has now sunk into a gray shadow not unlike Frank's mother had been in the last years of her life.

"Coffee?" Hannah offers.

"Sure, if you've got some made."

"It's no trouble."

"No, that's fine, then, don't worry about it."

“It’s really no trouble,” she says, her voice either exasperated or pleading, he can’t tell. So he nods, and as she turns to the stove, he takes a seat at the table. This feels instantly more natural to both of them, her working, him waiting, like so many days in the summers when he came home from college, when his mother was busy dying in the upstairs bedroom and Harold was busy not needing anyone’s help at all out in the fields.

“I don’t guess you’re here to bring me that hamburger recipe,” Hannah says, her back still turned.

Frank watches her sure movements, the clang of the pot against the iron stove top not alarming her in the slightest, the rattle of water through the tap a noise she clearly doesn’t notice. He spends hours in his own home, on weekends, working out kinks just like this, greasing door hinges and tacking down loose floorboards, trying in some tangible way to make the house perfect for Evelyn, and here’s Hannah prying open the refrigerator at the seal because the handle’s broken off and lying on top.

“I could fix that for you,” Frank says as Hannah sets a bottle of milk on the table.

“I could fix it myself, if it mattered that much,” she says. “Lot of other things on my list, first.” She looks at him evenly, no pity or embarrassment, seeing in his face the boy he was and the stranger he’s nearly become.

Frank glances away. "I wanted to ask you about what Harold was talking about the other night."

Hannah's brow furrows. "Football?" she asks.

"Football? Oh, no," Frank says, "though you're certainly welcome to come in Friday. In fact, that would be great, we'd love to have you." He smiles and she shakes her head but says a quick, sharp, "Well, we'll just see," that they both know means no.

The water boils and she pauses, and now it's clearly embarrassment she feels. "I'll have to wash some cups," she says, turning to the sink, and Frank says, "Hannah, please don't, I don't really need any coffee. I had lunch at the diner, I'm so full up I can barely walk anyway."

She takes the pan off the stove and, with just the dishtowel in her hands to keep occupied, takes a seat across from him. "Well, all right, then, if you're sure."

He nods. "I won't be but a minute, I need to get back to the clinic soon, anyway." It's a lie, but she'll never know. No one ever disputes his schedule, because no one else in town can do what he does. "What I wanted to ask," Frank says, "was about the land purchase."

Hannah's face remains blank, but Frank knows her better than this, at least. "Come on, now, I know he must've talked about it."

"He may have mentioned," she says.

"So what do you think?"

Her eyes narrow. "You're asking me for advice about buying a farm?"

He shakes his head. "I'm asking, if I buy this, Harold says he can take it over, says he can do this place and that one. My whole life, he's been able to do just about anything he wants, but - well, we're all getting older."

She nods. "I don't know that his plan is to do it completely himself," she says. "Now it's not my business to meddle in your affairs, of course, but since you're asking, I think your boy might have offered to help him."

"Zachary?"

Hannah nods. "He's been out here the last two weekends, helping with the cattle." Her voice gentles just slightly. "You should be proud, he's got a real knack."

Maybe it shouldn't surprise him. When Karen left, Frank was still busy at the hospital, too busy to take care of a four-year-old all the time. During the days he left the boy with Hannah and her five year old, Dale, until he was old enough to go to school and walk home himself. The boy always had a special bond with his aunt and uncle, and Frank, in those early years, encouraged it, because he knew Hannah had been disappointed by several miscarriages and had wanted a larger family.

Still, it comes as a bit of a shock to hear that Zachary - quiet, bookish Zachary, who has delicate artists'

hands and wide, emotive eyes like his mother - has been doing farm work.

"Where did you think he was?" Hannah asks.

Frank laughs, shakes his head. "School," he says. "We thought - well, Ev thought maybe he finally had a girl."

Hannah allows a thin smile. "Boys at that age, I'm sure he's got an eye on someone."

Frank nods. His mind is already back at the house, thinking through the talk he'll need to have that evening with Zachary, with Evelyn. He wants, suddenly, to be in his own kitchen, with his own wife, not his brother's, whose advice he should have sought first anyway. "Well, I guess that helps me make up my mind," he says, and stands.

Hannah remains seated, her face impassive; if it weren't for the towel twisted in her fists, out of his view, she would be proud of her display of calm. Frank may be a big doctor now, may be the man of the town, but out here he's still just the boy she met over meatloaf, a boy who needs to hear from a woman just to make up his mind.

"Tell Harold I say hello," Frank says, backing toward the door.

"I sure will. And we'll let you know if we're coming in on Friday."

"It would be a good time. I think - it would be good to see you there, and I think Dale would appreciate it.

He's a good player, you know, really knows the game." He hears the sharp edge in his own voice, feels ashamed of this sudden need to point out the ways he knows her son best, too, and out of the shame comes an unexpectedly rich kindness in his voice. "Really, Hannah, you know you're welcome any time." Neither tries to meet the other's eyes.

"Well, all right," she says, finally, and Frank nods, says his good-byes, not knowing what that final all right was at all, a place-holder or an agreement, and not sure he cares to know quite yet.

He steers his car - he has a truck, but it's a city truck, used for hauling branches and yard debris to the town dump, not something he takes to work but he could, it's that clean - out of the farm yard and back down the familiar lane that cuts out to the sand road. This drive he can make in his sleep, the turn from sand to blacktop where it meets the highway, the S-curve just outside of town to accommodate the tiny, usually dry creek. As he drives he pays attention to the town, watches it define itself from a blur to a tiny cluster tree-height buildings around a towering, silver grain elevator. Every once in a while, like now, he sees the town as he saw it when he returned, as a tiny island in the middle of a dry agrarian sea, and the feeling of being alone that swamps him is almost unbearable. Behind and beyond him is empty highway, cutting through the north edge of the town but no longer bringing any significant traffic,

not since the Interstate went operational six miles south. Maybe that's the difference, now; when he was a kid, cars were always tottering past on Highway 40, and now, the town truly seems inescapable, unmoving, deserted.

He's supposed to meet with Buddy Graham that afternoon, and he decides to head there directly instead of stopping by the office as planned. That change requires a three-point turn on the empty highway, but soon he's headed away from Midland toward Guilford, still invisible on the horizon but larger and somehow in his mind more welcome for its size and its lack of memories.

Frank has known Buddy Graham since they were in fourth or fifth grade, when Buddy's folks moved back to town to take care of his grandpa's farm. Buddy was in Frank's class at school, and alphabetical seating put them next to each other nearly every day for the next eight years. They were nearly roommates at college, would have been if Buddy hadn't gone to the other state school in Manhattan, where he could live for free with an aunt. They'd come back to Midland around the same time, Buddy with a law degree and a pretty, raven-haired wife he'd met in Chicago, Frank with his first wife, Karen, baby Zachary, and a guaranteed position working with Doc Greer and on staff at the Guilford Hospital.

Frank's return to town landed him near the top of the social hierarchy, which, even in a place with only a thousand residents in 1955, was an important place to be.

He and Karen had taken a modest home on a wide, paved street in the middle of town, two blocks from the grade school. The home was new, built in the early fifties by a school superintendant who moved his family back to Salina shortly after it was finished. Frank loves that story, loves telling it in his clinic, because his patients all draw their own morals from it: outsiders won't hang around.

Of course, into that, they may also read a bit of Frank's own story, and he's OK with that, has learned to lean into the small town embrace, the supposition that it must have been her, not him, who caused the split. He met Karen during medical school. She was a student at the Kansas City Art Institute, a sketch artist, mostly, her fingers constantly smudged by charcoal or graphite, her hair long and silky and loosely bound, usually, with a scarf or scrap of fabric. She was willowy and beautiful and a little bit delicate, and Frank loved every feature of her, every word from her mouth, every sketch from her fingers. They lived happily in Kansas City while he studied at the medical school, in a shabby apartment over a grocery store, where when Zachary was born in the winter of his residency they placed his crib in the kitchen so the stove heat would keep him warm. They couldn't afford room for a nursery, much less heat. Though she had always lived near the city, she was excited about the move back to Midland, the chance to really "get away from it all," as she said, and so Frank

had gamely packed her into a junky Oldsmobile and, with Zachary on her lap, driven them back to Midland to stay.

She was shocked by the absolute isolation of Midland. In truth, Frank had been a little surprised, too; he hadn't remembered how precious outside luxuries were in the town, where people still - nearly eight years after he'd left - gathered at Joe Morgan's house on Sunday nights to watch the television because no one had bought one for themselves.

At first, though, they settled pretty contentedly into small town life. Karen, never much for housework, kept busy with the baby and her drawing, sometimes taking him for long drives in the country during the day and returning with pages of new sketches that she would talk about excitedly, feeding Zachary strained peaches while Frank cooked dinner. They didn't see a lot of other people then, but those they did, like Buddy's wife Clarissa and the new schoolteacher from Topeka, provided a nice consistent company among which Karen seemed to flourish. She recommended books to Clarissa and did a few lessons in the teacher's class on impressionism.

Frank, for his part, was enjoying his work at the hospital and in his small Main Street clinic. He saw patients there for six hours a day and spent two additional hours at the hospital, one in the morning and one in the evening, checking on the progress of his admitted patients and writing out orders. He often stayed into the evenings,

as well, talking shop with the chief of staff, a gruff, exacting GP named Herman Greer who epitomized the picture of country doctor to his patients but kept a bottle of 20-year-old scotch in his desk drawer and a pipe on his desk, both of which he brought out when they stayed in to talk. Greer read the *Wall Street Journal* religiously on Sundays instead of going to church, where his wife, Patricia, was the head of the choir. He drove a green Fiat convertible that had cost him "more than I care to share" and frequently cursed in a way that would have made most of the Mennonites in the area blush. But Greer was nearly as popular as the town's pastors, greeted as "Doc" wherever he went, and Frank saw in this deference something to which he aspired. Doc Greer didn't have to go to church to be respected; he just had to do his job, and the rest was provided for him. He ran the hospital, aware of all the details from the brand of glass slides they used in the lab to the store where the nurses all bought their shoes in Salina, and everyone on the premises seemed to consider him a kind of gruff grandfather. By the end of his first year in practice, it was clear to everyone that Greer had adopted young Dr. Gerhardt as his protégé, and Frank looked forward to taking on more responsibility, maybe even eventually joining Greer in the attached building where Greer saw his own patients. He bought himself a new car, and after Valentine's Day, took Karen on a trip to Chicago for a week, where they went

shopping for dresses and suits they'd have no occasion to wear.

Returning home was difficult. Winter didn't end in Kansas until late March, often, and the six weeks following the trip were some of the harshest on record. An ice storm brought a heavy tree down on the house, damaging the kitchen and knocking out power indefinitely, and Frank, Karen, and Zach moved temporarily out to the farm with Hannah and Harold and their three-year-old son, Dale, while repairs were being managed.

Frank's work at the hospital took him away every day, but Karen was cooped up for two weeks with Hannah in her country kitchen, because the roads were too treacherous to drive. Hannah was well meaning but couldn't believe Karen didn't know how to cook and wasn't much help with cleaning. Harold had never liked Karen - had leveled his highest insult at her shortly after their arrival, asking in true puzzlement what Frank thought he was doing with "that impractical girl" - and they didn't work well under the same roof. But Frank was doing the best that he could, which he had been taught since childhood was the solution to every problem. He worked to afford the expensive, out-of-town contractors that were rebuilding the house, because Karen didn't want the local guys tramping through their things. That meant he was at the hospital for longer hours - taking call at night for a little extra money - and so, in

the short term, meant Karen was stuck with the in-laws for a little while longer. In the long term, though, it was supposed to mean everything would work out.

But then, one evening, she was gone. "Up and left," was how Hannah put it, looking purely puzzled when Frank came in that evening. She said she was going to drive to town for something - she'd left something at the house that she wanted - and then she never came back. Hannah had already called the lady from church who lived next door to Frank's house, and she confirmed then - as she did when Frank spoke to her - that Karen had emerged from the house late in the afternoon with a suitcase and cardboard box, loaded both in the trunk, and driven away.

She left a note, too, that Frank never shared with anyone, not his sister-in-law, not even Evelyn. I can live in the middle of nowhere, she said, but I can't survive in its suburbs. She drew a picture of Zachary in the margin and left a forwarding address that Frank recognized, her sister's place in Kansas City.

They saw each other last two years after she left, when they signed the divorce papers and she kissed Zachary, by then a sullen six year old with farm dirt under his fingernails, good-bye. Their original agreement had been that the boy would live a year with his mother, a year with his father, but that had fallen through year after year as Karen moved from place to place, following first this school

of art, then that painter, then a job in a gallery, then a place in an artist's colony. He has no idea where she is by now, though Zachary still gets cards at his birthday.

They have stayed in the same house that they lived in, though it's been completely redone, inside and out. Evelyn made it a condition of their marriage, and he hasn't objected to a single change, not turning Karen's painting room into a nursery, not clearing the kitchen of the original appliances, not the new, plastic-covered furniture in the family room.

He is thinking about this as he walks into Buddy Graham's office, where he nods at the secretary before he walks down the orange-carpeted hallway. This place hasn't changed in ten years. Buddy's at his desk, feet up, a half-eaten sandwich on a plate by his elbow, a cigarette burning in an ashtray. He looks up from reading a sheet of paper as Frank walks in and grins.

"A little early, aren't you?"

"Well, don't let me interrupt," Frank says, falling easily into their usual patter. Buddy drops his feet and Frank takes a chair, and they chew quickly through their usual conversation starters: local football, local crops, the weather, the wives, the auction coming up Sunday. This last is a particular fascination they both share thanks in part to occupation, as Frank and Buddy are the two men in town most likely to know when and how the town's old farmers

are going to kick off. They've both had their eyes on Del Gruber's motorcycles for a few weeks, and so the report that his pneumonia is getting better is, briefly, a disappointment to Buddy.

"Well, what other bad news did you come here to dump?" Buddy asks, putting on his glasses as if to signal the switch to business mode.

Frank leans back and explains, slowly, without mentioning his brother, Harold's idea about the Wedel land.

Buddy crosses his arms. "Of course you know I shouldn't really say whether I've heard anything from Wedel or not about that business."

"Oh, sure," Frank says, knowing the difference between shouldn't and can't for Buddy is vast.

"But if I had," he continues, "I'd say it's land that would be a pretty good investment, for a guy like you. I'd say a guy like me had even considered it, till the missus talked me down." Frank nods. They have some significant and mysterious debts, relating to whatever Buddy's wife spent while she was in college. "But there's one thing. Now, I've been hearing people say at church that Wedel's gonna sell to the government, and that's not exactly true. Thing about the government is, they don't exactly give a choice."

"How do you mean?"

Buddy frowns. "Thing called eminent domain. They can't just take any property they want, but they can take property they can prove they need for the national interest. Same way the railroad came through, same way the Interstate was done. This time, it's the military wants the land, and there just ain't much that could be done to stop those guys. Better luck against the highway boys even now that it's all laid, you ask me."

"Huh," Frank says. He leans forward, gestures to Buddy's cigarette, and Buddy pulls one from his desk drawer with a raised eyebrow.

"Thought you doctors couldn't smoke anymore."

"Not at home, we can't," Frank says, and he lights the cigarette using Buddy's silver-plated lighter. The cigarette isn't even something he craves - he's never been easily addicted - but it gives him a way to be silent. Right now, that's all he wants, to just sit here silently until Buddy says something that gives him a little bit of hope.

"It's not to say, of course, that you shouldn't buy," Buddy says after a moment. "Might be they take the land anyway, but it could be a little trickier, they weren't dealing with a guy like August Wedel. Man's got too much on his plate."

"Uh-huh. Wife troubles."

Buddy grins. "You can't let that keep you down," he says, and Frank laughs. "I don't know. I was you, I'd have a talk with Mitchell, see if he'll cut you a deal on the loan, and I'll be happy to write up the papers for you. There's better ways to handle that insurance than how August's had it done the last few years."

"Yeah," Frank agrees, though he hadn't even thought that far. Insurance, yield, all of that is Harold's cup of tea, and good for him. Good for them both. "So, even if we can't do much against the government, you think we might be able to raise a little stink, huh?"

"Enough to make the Army think twice? Maybe. They're still gonna come to the same conclusion."

"Might help me with my own wife problem," Frank says. "Think Evelyn would like it just fine if this got a mention in the church bulletin."

Buddy laughs. "You know, Clarissa's been fixed on this hospital newsletter thing lately. Ever comes down to it, I bet we could trade a space in one for the other and have a happy month all around."

Frank grins. He stands up and shakes Buddy's hand. "Well, that's a deal, then," he says. "You take care, now. Say hi to Clarissa."

"Will do."

He leaves feeling a little more buoyant about the whole deal. He doesn't need to save the day, after all - he just needs to try. No one will ever know the difference.